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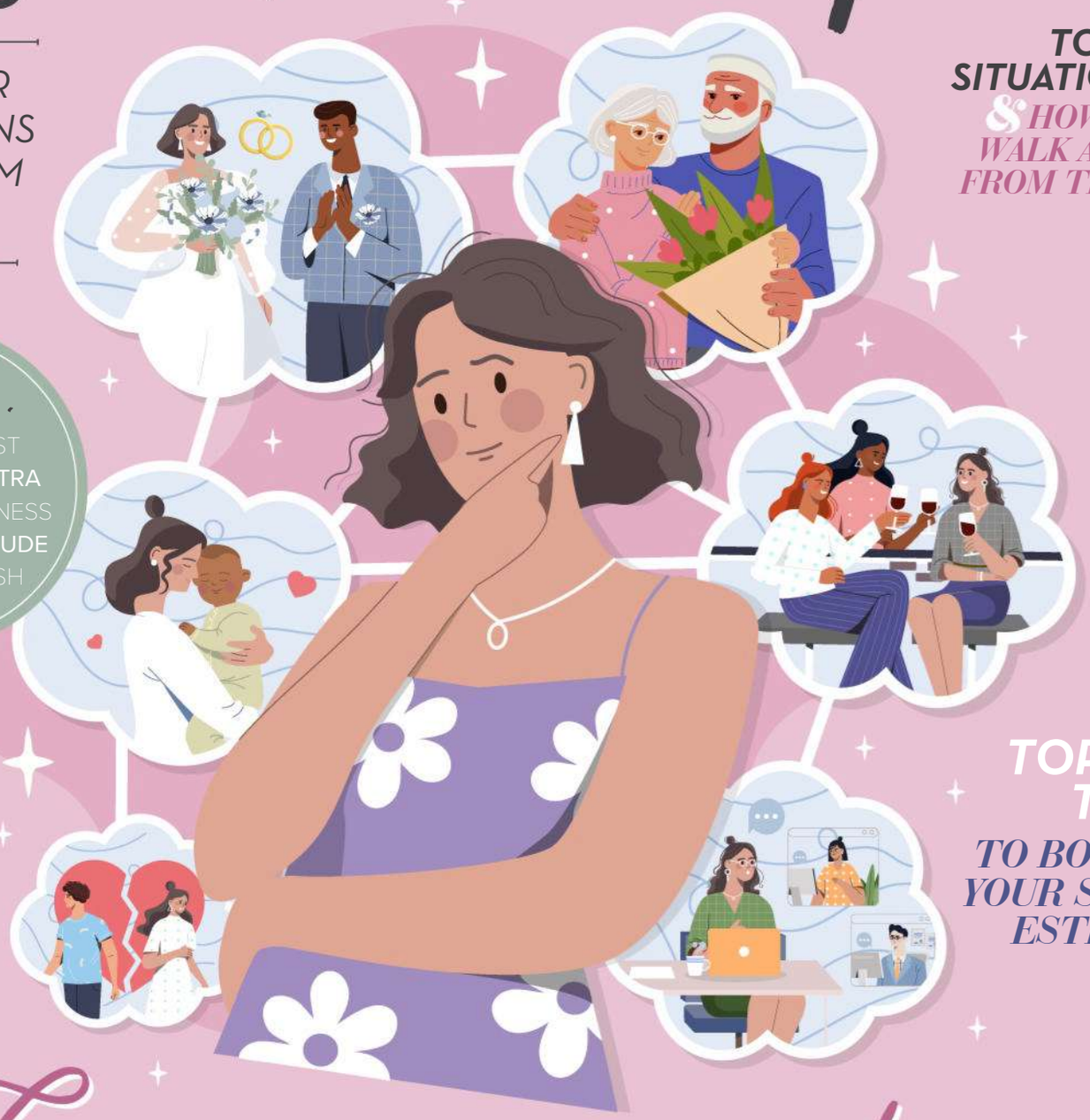

How to...
LEARN TO TRUST
FIND YOUR MANTRA
MASTER FORGIVENESS
PRACTISE GRATITUDE
BE MORE SELFISH

ACHIEVE BALANCE
LEARN TO SET HEALTHY BOUNDARIES

+ TOP 10 TIPS TO BOOST YOUR SELF ESTEEM

Communication & YOU

Improve your skills and nurture your relationship with others

Digital Edition

FUTURE
FIRST EDITION

WELCOME TO Understanding Relationships

BUILD BETTER CONNECTIONS & TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

Relationships are an essential part of our lives. Science has shown that they are vital for our emotional, mental and physical well-being and that being socially connected forms a key part of our happiness and satisfaction. However, it can be challenging to manage and sustain relationships with family, friends, romantic partners and even ourselves among the chaos of our busy lives. Packed full of expert guidance, inside we take a look at how to build better relationships, why we feel shy, and how to handle difficult conversations. We also explore how to boost your self-esteem, reverse negative thought patterns, and why it is important to take time for yourself.

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EVERYBODY NEEDS SOMEBODY

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Social ANIMALS

Edoardo Albert explains how human bonding, interactions and relationships are key to our development

WORDS EDOARDO ALBERT

"You're beautiful. Yes, yes you are. You're beautiful, aren't you?" The words are spoken in a sing-song, accompanied by head nods and the broadest of smiles.

It's a recording of a mother's first words to her newborn baby. She is holding the tiny little boy on her lap, looking intently down into his face, her own expression wide with wonder. The baby is staring up at her, his eyes rolling a bit as they are still not under his control. It is a picture of the first forming of the bonds that make us human: mother and child.

The word we use to describe these links is peculiarly apt: bond. Both a joining together and, in the plural, sometimes a constriction and constraint. The bonds that join us, to parents, to spouses, to family; to friends, colleagues and the wider society, set us in contexts that give our lives shape, substance and wider meaning. And there is evidence that even at the very earliest stage in life, when a baby is less than a day old, it will preferentially look at a human face rather than a similar sized object but without the normal layout of eyes, nose and mouth. A baby is predisposed to look at faces, searching among those clustering around it for the signs that mark out its mother. Among those signs is the 'baby language' new mothers adopt with their infant: the content tends to feature repeated words and phrases but even more important is its unusual tonal quality, a sing-song rhythm that sets it apart from ordinary human communication as 'baby talk'.

The pioneering work in the study of human affections and bonds was done by the British psychologist, John Bowlby (1907-1990). Working with children orphaned during World War II, Bowlby realised they mourned their lost parents and that this sense of loss was enduring and caused them considerable difficulties. Well, naturally, you might say. Wouldn't take a Freud to work that out. But the problem was, according to the prevailing psychological theories of the time (the decade or two after the end of World War II), children bonded emotionally to their parents because the parent supplied the food and shelter that satisfied the child's 'primary drive' for sustenance and shelter. The emotional bond was secondary to this primary drive. So, according to theory, these orphaned children should have formed emotional bonds to the people who now supplied them with food and shelter: foster parents, orphanage caretakers and so on. But they did not. They carried the original loss with them and despite the general kindness of the people taking care of them, and their satisfying that primary drive for food and shelter, the children did not form anything like the same emotional bonds with their new caregivers as they had enjoyed with their parents. »

> "A BABY IS PREDISPOSED TO LOOK AT FACES, SEARCHING FOR THE SIGNS THAT MARK OUT ITS MOTHER"

Bowlby's genius was that he was able to remove the blinkers placed over his eyes by his training and look at what he was seeing in the children and adolescents he was treating. To formulate his work, Bowlby made use of the studies by Harry Harlow with baby rhesus monkeys. Harlow raised the baby monkeys with two artificial mothers: a wire 'mother' who provided milk, and a terry-cloth 'mother' who gave no sustenance but could be cuddled. The little baby rhesus monkeys preferred the terry-cloth 'mother', only visiting the wire 'mother' to feed. When coupled with Konrad Lorenz's work on imprinting in animals such as ducks, Bowlby had the elements for a new and revolutionary theory of attachment.

LOVE OR LUST

Love is not the same emotion as lust. Lust lights up the reward/motivation parts of the brain, love fires the care and empathy regions.

Bowlby argued that the attachment between children and parents in human beings was specific to us as a species and resulted from the unusual dependency and helplessness of human babies and children. Babies and children exhibit particular attachment behaviours: proximity/contact maintenance and separation protest. In other words, babies and young children try to stay close to their parents and cry when they are separated from them. By keeping in contact with a parent who provides protection (other work cited by Bowlby showed that babies and children formed attachments to figures who provided security but did not necessarily provide them with food: that is, fathers), a baby is ensuring its own survival.

In evolutionary terms, the only protection a human infant could find was from its parents: other species might leave an infant in safety in a den or leave it camouflaged by its own markings, but none of these options are available for a human baby. Safety lies in the arms of mum or dad. Thus natural selection ensured that human babies would exhibit a suite of behaviours to maintain contact with their parents and to prevent separation from them: think of a baby's protests when it is handed off to a visiting relative to attempt to coo over, and how often the baby has to be handed back to its mother before it will settle. This safety and security seeking behaviour continues as babies grow into children. As Bowlby drily remarked, a child is like a missile when trying to make contact with an attachment figure: it won't stop until it hits the target.

While infants become attached to their parents or caregiver, the quality of that attachment varies depending on how secure the child is about whether his or her parents will be available and respond when needed. A baby and child who grows up confident that their parents will be there when they need them and do what is needed will, not surprisingly, tend to grow up secure in other areas of life and character, although the jury remains undecided on just how widely spread this influence is through aspects of later life and character.

But while the parents set the foundations and the ground floor of what we will become, it is in interacting with our peers, as children, adolescents and adults, that the superstructure of our lives is formed. Going back to that study with infant monkeys raised with wire and terry cloth 'mothers', it is perhaps not surprising that, when introduced into the company of other monkeys after this upbringing, they proved woefully inadequate in their social relations, either abnormally fearful or aggressive. Among the females, those who did manage to successfully mate and produce young proved to be poor mothers, forgetful and inattentive to their babies.

Human children learn a great deal by imitation and play when interacting with their fellows and typically go through three stages: solitary play, mutually aware playing and socially interactive playing. While all three types of play persist through childhood, there is normally a shift towards a greater proportion of socially interactive playing as a child gets older. Rough-and-tumble play among boys first serves to teach boys limits and then, in adolescence, helps to create and maintain social hierarchies among peers.

In adults, the search for new bonds begins with a view towards love, marriage, partnership and, from the evolutionary point of view, reproduction. The pair bond between spouses is both social and sexual: a bond that is stronger psychologically, behaviourally and sexually than other bonds. Such powerful bonding occurs in conjunction with some of the most powerful neurotransmitters in the brain firing off in abundance: oxytocin, dopamine, corticosterone and vasopressin are among the cocktail of chemicals that produce that heady, breathy, heart-stopping sense of being in love. In this it contrasts powerfully with the other significantly different relationships that form adult life: the relatively weak bonds of acquaintanceship.

While the strong bonds of spousal and parent-child relationships act to cement the family unit and its wider kin group, acquaintanceships allow the people engaging with them to gain access to very different sources of information and social networks. Social studies have

> "HUMAN BEINGS ARE SOCIAL ANIMALS. RAISED IN ISOLATION, CHILDREN WILL NOT EVEN LEARN LANGUAGE, LET ALONE SOCIAL SKILLS"

shown that the people in strong social bonds tend to share many social features and to have broadly similar expectations and ideas. However, acquaintances, from work colleagues through to informal social contacts in contexts as different as sports clubs and church groups, provide access to a much wider range of social and cultural information and ideas, and are therefore important in providing avenues towards improving the social and economic status of the individual and his or her strongly bonded kin.

Human beings are social animals. Raised in isolation, children will not even learn language, let alone social skills. Although some among us might seek out solitude, we are all born of the flesh of relationships and form our first and foundational attachments with the people who raise us. The old adage, first proposed by Aristotle, proves largely true: "Give me a child until he is seven and I will show you the man." The corollary of that, in the bleak Biblical verse, is that the iniquity of the parents will play out in their children, even to the third or fourth generation. Numerous studies suggest that this is all too accurate.

DEVELOPMENTAL DISORDERS

The boy, jumping up and down, flapping his hands. The one rocking backwards and forwards, headphones on, not meeting anyone's eyes. The girl at the edge of the group, slightly awkward, who mimics what the other girls are doing. Or the brilliant new colleague who doesn't quite get the joke, or smiles at the wrong moment. People make judgements on whether they wish to make friends and deep social contacts with other people based on quick, narrow slice judgements when first meeting a new individual. These judgements are largely unconscious, drawing from a whole range of apprehension of non-verbal behaviours, and they are remarkably impervious to change. And they impact very badly on people who are autistic. For these narrow-slice judgements leave those meeting autistic people for the first time with an unspoken reluctance to pursue social contact, to invite them for a drink after work, to engage with them outside of school. This is despite these same judgements being positive with respect to trustworthiness and ability. And, as such, they often have a devastating effect on the social capacity of autistic people. For it is a myth that all autistic people have no desire for social contact: there is a small subset who voluntarily withdraw from social contact, particularly among the non-verbal, but for most autistic people social contact is as important as it is for neurotypical people. But sadly, it is often denied them. Only 16 per cent of autistic adults are in paid work, with all the consequences of poverty and social isolation that this brings. So look past these narrow-slice judgements to the person behind, whole, entire, and worthy and wanting friendship.

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Build BETTER relationships

You may not have the ability to change other people but you do have the power to improve your relationship with them

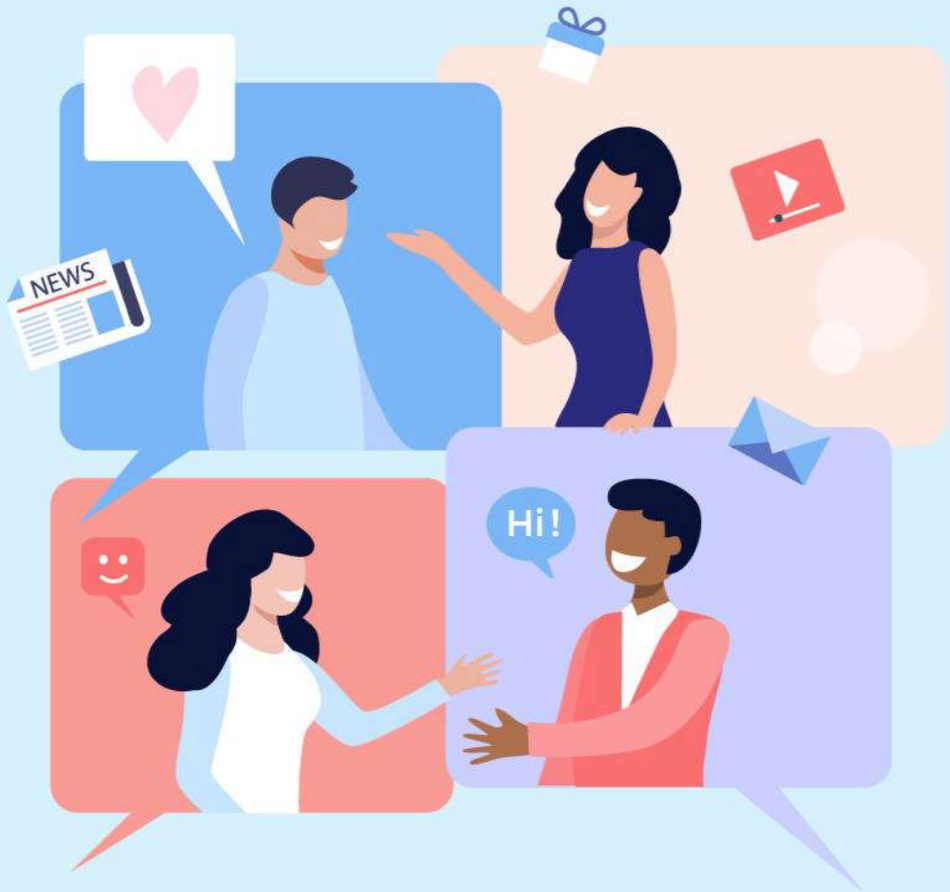
WORDS SARA NIVEN

How do you get on with those around you – your partner, children, parents, siblings, even colleagues at work? Would you describe your relationships as good in the main or do things often feel strained with definite room for improvement?

Although when we talk about relationships in general, romantic ones first tend to spring to mind, but our attachments and interactions with other people in our life can be similarly significant.

"Relationships are key to our health and happiness and give meaning and purpose to our lives," confirms chartered clinical psychologist and author Dr Jessamy Hibberd. "We're highly social beings and early humans needed to live together and get on in a group to ensure survival. This means we have a deep need for social inclusion and research shows that a lack of social support is as bad for you as smoking. Social isolation is associated with heightened risk of disease and early death, whereas warm and supportive relationships have long-term benefits for health and longevity."

If a relationship isn't going well, we may find ourselves harbouring feelings of anger, resentment, guilt or general sadness, depending on the situation and how it impacts on us. For a relationship that has seriously broken down, be this due to a betrayal, major disagreement or other factors such as drug or alcohol addiction, professional help may be the best option to try to work through it, either by seeing a counsellor alone or ideally in the form of couples or family therapy. Unfortunately though, even with the best will in the world, sometimes it can be healthier to walk away (easier with some types of relationships than others, of course).



The good news is that when it comes to the daily niggles and gripes everyone has or unhelpful patterns of communication we may have fallen into with our nearest and dearest, a lot can be done to improve matters.

Here we look at five factors to bear in mind for building better relationships.

Lend an ear

Possibly one of the most powerful tools in the relationship improvements box, active listening is very different from sitting nodding, wondering when you will get your chance »

WHEN TO SEEK PROFESSIONAL HELP

However hard one person tries, sometimes it's not enough to get a relationship back on track, and it can be worth seeking professional help if you want to try to salvage it.

"Every relationship has ups and downs, and arguments in themselves aren't necessarily a bad or unhealthy thing if they lead to issues being resolved," says Dee Holmes of Relate. "When something seems to be continually looping around however, and arguments become less about practicalities and more of a personal attack with insults and resentment building, that is a red flag warning sign. Counselling with a qualified couple or family therapist can provide a safe space, free from distractions for people to start to get to the bottom of what the real issues are and how to work through them. It ensures a discussion doesn't escalate into just another row and the counsellor can reflect back what they are seeing going on to help additionally."

To find out more about Relate and the services offered, visit **www.relate.org.uk**.

to speak or carry on with whatever you were doing. And it is the complete opposite of muttering 'Uh huh,' while browsing your phone as someone tries to tell you about their day.

"We have so many pressures, distractions and pulls on our attention that it can be difficult to be fully present even with those closest to us but ensuring someone feels heard and understood is really important," confirms Dr Hibberd, author of *The Imposter Cure*, (Octopus, £12.99).

> "ACTIVE LISTENING CAN TAKE PRACTICE BUT IS WORTH THE EFFORT"

Pointers for active listening include good eye contact (not staring intently, which can be intimidating), open body language (leaning towards the other person and avoiding crossed arms and legs), and an awareness of when to respond and when to stay quiet.

It's important not to interrupt or immediately override someone's story with one of your own – 'You think that was a bad day, that's nothing – wait 'til you hear mine!'.

Instead, when they finish speaking, try showing that you have been listening by summing up what they've been saying without judgement and with an invitation for them to continue. 'So, it sounds as though you felt disappointed today because you didn't get the feedback you were hoping and had worked hard for?'.

For something seemingly so simple, active listening can take practice (it is a learned skill when people train to become counsellors, for instance) but is definitely worth the effort in terms of the difference it can make in any kind of relationship.

A balancing act

Relationship expert, therapist and author Dr John Gottman extensively researched the secret of lasting, healthy relationships and noted that the couples with these clock up five positive interactions for every negative one. Dr Gottman even claimed to be able to predict the marriages heading for divorce based on this magic 5:1 ratio.

"The bottom line: even though some level of negativity is necessary for a stable relationship, positivity is what nourishes your love," his website states.

An interaction can be as simple as a loving touch or gesture such as reaching for our partner's hand or simply an experience of being listened to attentively, as described previously. A negative one can include something neutral like failing to make a »

CHILD'S PLAY

If you are a parent, building a healthy and trusting relationship with your child is probably one of the most important things you will ever do. You are effectively helping to shape another human being's self-esteem, and providing them with a good grounding for later life.
"When you communicate well with your child, it leads to a strong relationship, greater cooperation, and feelings of worth," confirms therapist Zinny Perryman, who has specialised in working with children and family interventions. "If the opposite is the case, it can lead to your child switching off, conflict and feelings of worthlessness. They are far less likely to open up about any difficulties or worries and it can be easy to lose touch with what is going on for them."
She advises:

Be as courteous to your child as you would a close friend. If you regularly interrupt them halfway through a story or break off to pay attention to something else, you are sending the message that what they have to say isn't important.

Unless other people are specifically meant to be included in the discussion, hold important conversations with your children in private. Embarrassing them or putting them on the spot in front of others will lead only to resentment and hostility.

Avoid towering over younger children. Physically get down to their level to talk face to face.

Use 'door opener' statements like 'That's really interesting' or 'Tell me more about that' to encourage your child to share ideas and feelings and show you are interested and respect what they have to say. Your tone needs to be genuine and your focus on them.

If you are very angry about something, unless it is an emergency that needs addressing immediately, wait until you feel calmer and more objective. Address the behaviour rather than labelling the child – they may have done something you view as stupid or bad but they are not a stupid, bad child. Your child needs to feel accepted even if their behaviour isn't.

comment on something our partner shows us as well as dismissive or critical statements such as shrugging our shoulders to indicate we don't care or rolling our eyes sarcastically.

Dr Gottman stresses that couples need to regularly demonstrate appreciation and respect for one another, something that sometimes gets lost over time. Although his balance theory has been developed to apply specifically to couples, there may be lessons that can be taken on board for other relationships given that everyone has a need for appreciation and we can all be guilty of taking others for granted.

Make the time

Without quality time together, it's easy to lose touch with what's going on in someone else's life, even when we're living under the same roof. We also have less shared, positive experiences to cushion the difficult times or negative experiences, becoming ships that pass in the night, or even ships set on a clear collision course whenever the sea gets stormy!

"Quality time doesn't have to involves hours, it could be as little as half an hour or even ten minutes in some cases," explains family and couples counsellor Dee Holmes, who is a senior practice consultant for Relate. "It is about managing that time and keeping it free from distractions. If your partner or child wants your company or attention and you have no choice but to take an urgent call or dash off for an appointment then be honest and let them know when you will be available for them later. But it is a good idea to build in pockets of regular time for family members – perhaps you decide that for half an hour after your child comes home from school you will spend that time uninterrupted with them or when your partner gets back from work you make a habit of having a cup of tea together."

While quality time can involve watching TV or a film together, Holmes stresses that an important aspect is the togetherness of an activity rather than simply people's proximity.

"I see children walking to school glued to their phones like zombies when previously they would have been chatting to friends walking alongside them," she observes. "Similarly, families can often be in the same room, all on different devices without any communication and it is something we hear complaints about in the counselling room. It can be a good idea to set healthy boundaries regarding the use of social media, such as no phones at the dinner table or during a certain time of day. These boundaries will be different for each family."

Dr Hibberd agrees on the significance of time and how it is spent. "Having experiences together is important in relationships, whether that's something major or something as simple as sharing a meal or a joke."

A FRIEND INDEED

A good friend is worth their weight in gold but when life is busy, how often do you manage a catch up? With some people boasting hundreds of 'friends' on Facebook, it can be all too easy for friendships to become more virtual than real. Perhaps you used to send cards but now it is much easier to post a quick 'Happy Birthday,' or you've been messaging a friend for months but neither of you have actually spoken on the phone for a year, let alone met up to see each other in person.

If this sounds familiar, it really can be worth making a little effort to bring a friendship back to (real) life. An unexpected phone call just to ask how they are, a card or ideally an arrangement to meet (that doesn't get postponed or cancelled so many times it never happens) can make all the difference, as will taking a genuine interest in what is going on in their life as opposed to only wanting to tell them about what is going on in yours.

You never know when you will need your friends so it is worth cultivating them and showing them how much they mean to you rather than leaving them feeling you only ever reach out in a crisis.

> "WE CAN'T ASSUME OTHERS, EVEN THOSE CLOSEST TO US, WILL BE MIND READERS"

Explanations and understanding

Have you ever experienced a situation where someone stomps around, slamming doors with a pained, angry expression on their face, leaving you unsure if you have upset them, and feeling it is best to stay out of the way?

Later you discover they were stressed over something completely unrelated to you, or alternatively they thought they were sending out a clear message they were tired and needed help but you had no idea.

"When difficulties arise in a relationship, I often ask people if they have told those close to them how they feel and am often told they would expect that person to already know," explains Relate's Dee Holmes. "But we can't assume others, even those closest to us, will be mind readers. They may interpret a situation completely differently or not have a clue you see something as a problem as it hasn't been the case in a previous relationship. You can't underestimate the power of explaining."

She points out that it is also easy for miscommunication to arise when using text or WhatsApp, where there is no tone of voice or body language to help with communication. However, there may be times when writing things down can be useful in opening up lines of communication.

"For a situation in a family that continues to cause issues or arguments, you might suggest everyone writes down three things they feel would be helpful in resolving it and then sit and discuss them. Sometimes writing a letter to a partner, parent or friend could be a useful exercise if you find something very difficult to broach face to face or think they may not let you finish what you want to say."

Role play

If you've ever noticed that your interactions with different people vary and they seem to bring out different sides of you, welcome to the world of Transactional Analysis, or TA.

This is a theory developed in the 1950s that is used by some therapists to help explain why we think, feel and behave the way we do, particularly when it comes to our relationships with others. Very simply put, the theory involves three sub personalities known as ego states – Parent, Adult and Child – that we regularly switch between (with some further divisions within these, such as Nurturing Parent and Critical Parent).

It explains that we take on different roles depending on who we are dealing with and how we feel at that time, and it can be easy to fall into unhelpful patterns and roles. Realising we are doing this provides the opportunity to shift gears into a response that can improve interactions and relationships.

For example, if you are regularly annoyed with your partner about not doing their share of household chores, it can be easy to assume the role of Critical Parent and come out with an angry, judgemental statement.

Switching into our rational Adult ego state means we might say something like 'I feel I've been doing most of the chores this week and am really tired. I know you're working hard too but I'd appreciate help tonight'.

This invites the other person to (hopefully) respond as an adult as opposed to taking on the role of sulky child or becoming critical themselves and telling you all the things they feel you haven't done that week, with the risk of the conversation escalating into a row.

Our relationships, whether with relatives, partners, children, friends or colleagues, are wonderful things and enrich our lives. By being more aware of them, we should all get more out of our own relationships. ■

© Getty Images

WHAT MAKES US shy?

Being shy can impact the way we live our lives, but is it a trait that can be overcome? Or do we need to learn to embrace our shyness?

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

Going to parties, giving presentations, attending networking events or after-work drinks... These social interactions are just part of normal life for so many people, passing by without too much consideration. But for those who are shy, these engagements can feel more like challenges, or hurdles to be overcome, which fill a person with apprehension and anxiety.

Shyness is a quality that is found in cultures around the world. It's often grouped in with other conditions and traits, such as social anxiety (see boxout above right) or introversion, but it is distinct from both of these. Shyness isn't a phobia of social situations in the same way that social anxiety is, and an introvert often prefers

SOCIAL ANXIETY

While shyness and social anxiety share many traits, they are not the same thing. According to the NHS, social anxiety (or social phobia) is "a long-lasting and overwhelming fear of social situations." It is an intense fear and can have a very big impact on everyday life. It's normal to worry about going into social events or new situations, but social anxiety is more severe. It can cause panic attacks, physical symptoms like feeling sick or heart palpitations, constantly worrying about doing something wrong, a dislike of being watched and a general fear of normal everyday activities that might involve interaction with others. Social anxiety can sometimes be linked to other mental health issues too, such as anxiety or depression. For those who find their shyness overwhelming or if it's impacting on daily life, speak to your GP to see what help is available.

time alone to re-energise, turning down invitations through choice, not worry. Shy people often want to be able to interact with others, to take part in events or give confident speeches, but find themselves unable to do so, consumed instead by a sense of dread, anxiousness or uncertainty.

The late Bernardo J Carducci (1952–2018), a professor of psychology and former director of the Shyness Research Institute at the Indiana University Southeast, USA, was an internationally recognised researcher in the field of shyness. His main area of study was in finding ways to help people overcome their innate shyness. "Shyness can be defined as the presence of anxious reactions and excessive self-consciousness and negative self-evaluation in response to real or imagined social interactions," he wrote in an article for the American Psychological Association in 2017. "Specifically, these experiences must occur to the degree that it produces enough discomfort to interfere with and inhibit one's ability to perform successfully in social situations."

> "SOME PEOPLE ARE NATURALLY MORE PRONE TO SHYNESS THAN OTHERS"

He identified three different components to shyness, which broadly included the physical effects (a raised heart rate or 'butterflies'); the cognitive reactions (self-consciousness, negativity, lack of self-belief, worry that everyone is watching, or the fear of doing something wrong); and finally the behaviours exhibited (avoidance of situations, not speaking up, or limiting eye contact).

Nature or nurture?

There is evidence to suggest that some people are born more prone to shyness than others, but it's not down to a specific 'shyness gene'. A 2012 study from Vanderbilt University (published in *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*) found that there may be a link between shyness and deficits in two key areas of the brain: the amygdala and hippocampus. This is caused by what is known as 'habituation failure', when a person doesn't adapt to new stimuli. Researchers monitored the brains of the participants while they were shown pictures of unfamiliar faces multiple times. For the participants considered to be uninhibited, these areas of the brain were triggered when the faces were new, but the response declined the more times they saw the same faces (a process called habituation). However, for the participants considered to be inhibited, the same areas of the brain continued to respond to the faces, regardless of whether they were new or being shown again.

"This failure to habituate provides a novel neural mechanism for understanding the shy and cautious behaviour that is characteristic of inhibited individuals," explained the study's lead author, Dr Jennifer Blackford. "Individuals who familiarise more slowly may find encounters with new people overwhelming and thus avoid new social experiences, whereas those who adjust more quickly may be more likely to seek novel social experiences."

Results from an earlier study, conducted in 2010 by a team of American and Chinese scientists, suggest that around 20% of people are born with Sensory Perception Sensitivity (SPS), which can manifest as being inhibited. SPS may account for some cases of shyness, as well as other traits such as introversion or conditions like social anxiety.

But there is much more to shyness than any neurological explanation. The trait is often linked to the way we think other people perceive us, focusing our anxieties inwards. Low self-esteem can be a trigger for shyness: we don't value ourselves and therefore assume we have no value for others, limiting our engagement in social situations. But it's not always about low self-esteem; shyness is often triggered by a worry about how we are thought about by others: 'Will I say the wrong thing?' 'What if I react incorrectly?' 'What if I accidentally drop something?' In the moment, these are very real worries and concerns that are difficult to brush aside. »

Without intervention, this negative self-talk will continue, causing our shyness to prevent us from enjoying social situations.

The way we are raised, and our experiences throughout childhood, are also influential factors in whether or not we become shy as we grow up. Behavioural inhibition, for example, can start in childhood. Overprotective parents may limit certain behaviours or restrict social activities, which can mean children don't get the chance to develop confident social skills. As we get older, we start to self-manage our behaviours, limiting them to what we feel comfortable with, which then creates a cycle of shyness. For example, for a child who is predisposed to shyness, it can be hard to interact with other children at playtime or when working together on a project. As time goes on, the familiar and comfortable behaviour is that of being an observer – rather than an active participant – in social situations, which makes it harder to break the cycle.

As adults, we may already have a pattern of behaviour that relates to our shyness. Someone who has never had the confidence to speak out in a business meeting before, for example, will find that it becomes more difficult to make that first comment. Over time, worry creeps in... they may think that speaking up would appear out of character, and that this might attract unwanted attention, or perhaps even judgement, from their colleagues.

> "SHYNESS SHOULDN'T BE VIEWED AS A BARRIER TO SUCCESS"

Shyness can affect people in different ways and in different areas of life, some of which can be more problematic than others. Shyness can also influence the path that our lives take, as we're drawn to those things that make us feel most comfortable. Someone who is generally shy is unlikely to follow a career path in television, for example, or pursue a role that requires a lot of networking and social interaction, unless they can learn to master their shyness to follow a particular passion. This can be one of the biggest problems with shyness – it can become a hurdle that prevents us from following the path we want to follow. In a work environment, being shy can mean being overlooked. Those who speak up and engage in discussions are noticed more, which can help their career progression.

The way that shyness is viewed culturally has an impact on our behaviours too. In a BBC article, *The Science Behind Why Some Of Us Are Shy* (adapted from an episode of CrowdScience called *Why Am I Shy?*), it's reported that the traits of confidence and extroversion are valued behaviours in the USA. However, in some Asian countries, being quieter is a more desirable trait. These external and societal influences will inevitably impact on the way that we view our own shyness. In the Western world, we may view our own shyness as a problem or issue that needs to be solved, rather than accepting it as part of our personality.

Overcoming shyness

Shyness isn't a condition that necessarily needs to be cured. It's quite normal to feel shy in certain situations, and generally it doesn't cause any real problems. However, if shyness does develop into something more – causing higher than normal levels of anxiety, triggering depression, or having a noticeable impact on quality of life – then this could be social anxiety, which should be treated by a psychological professional.

That said, many people do opt to seek help to overcome or combat their shyness. This may be because they're struggling at work when it comes to engaging with co-workers or clients, or maybe they want to be able to socialise without the worry. Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is usually the most effective psychological therapy, by getting to the root causes or beliefs that can manifest as shyness.

CBT looks at changing thought patterns and related behaviours, identifying those thoughts that are negative and could be contributing to patterns of shyness. It can help patients to understand the key drivers behind their shyness. For example, in the work environment, feeling shy in meetings or presentations could be a deep-seated fear of saying the wrong thing in front of senior colleagues, which could in itself be linked to a strong work ethic and a drive to succeed. CBT helps to unpick these connected strands, learn to recognise unhelpful thoughts and then put in place mechanisms and strategies to cope with situations as they come up.

There is also something called the Social Fitness Model (**shyness.com**) developed by Dr Lynne Henderson, which suggests that social fitness is something that can be achieved in the same way as physical fitness. In a 2011 research paper, *Social*

Fitness: The Online Treatment of Shyness, psychologist Peter Saunders said: "The term 'Social Fitness' refers to the idea that, similar to physical fitness, in order to stay in social shape we need to be constantly exerting effort and working out by making social contact with others." It is essentially a form of cognitive behavioural therapy, delivered with an ethos of compassion. Changing long-term behavioural patterns should be approached sensitively and carefully.

This means that for those who have a desire to be more confident in social situations, it will take plenty of practice, but it can be achieved. It might be as simple as starting small, by striking up a conversation with someone in a shop or while waiting for a bus. The idea is to embrace or engineer situations that challenge shyness so that, over time, people develop strategies for dealing with bigger social interactions. The important thing to remember is that it's not about trying to change who a person is; it's about learning how to recognise unhelpful thoughts and address issues with social situations to make them more manageable.

Embracing shyness

But is shyness really something that needs to be overcome at all? Maybe it's better just to accept being naturally a shy person. Shyness doesn't mean that we can't achieve great things. Many well-known people have spoken out about their own experiences of shyness. The idea of a shy celebrity might seem somewhat of a paradox, given that these are often people who have chosen to follow a path into the limelight. Take one of the celebrity world's biggest apparent exhibitionists Kim Kardashian. She is reported to have once said: "I'm the girl who's too shy to dance in a nightclub – maybe for one song, and then that's it. The real Kim is very shy and reserved and not outspoken and loud like everybody assumes she is." Other famous faces who have spoken out about being shy include Johnny Depp, Keira Knightley and Steven Spielberg.

What these celebrities have managed to do is accept their natural shyness, but project a confident exterior to the world. It's not about denying part of who they are, just that they are able to separate their life in the public eye from their true self, as seen off-camera. Shyness, then, certainly doesn't need to be a barrier to success, if it can be carefully managed when needed.

The trait of shyness comes with other benefits too. Shy people are often observers, watching and studying in social situations, rather than engaging. With this comes an attention to detail and a better understanding of human behaviour, which can be useful skills. They're also more likely to consider risks and plan ahead, which means that any big life decisions are made in a measured and confident way.

Shy people may find it hard to socialise in large groups, but they are usually great friends. Often with a strong sense of empathy, shyer people can be good listeners and advice givers. They're not prone to gossiping, so are often considered trustworthy. Shy people may have fewer friendships overall, but those that they do have are deeply valued and long-lasting.

Being shy doesn't define a person; it's just one behavioural trait that makes up a wonderful, unique individual. So while there are some benefits to be had in learning to manage common social situations without anxiety, we should also embrace the shyness as part of who we are.

5 WAYS TO OVERCOME SHYNESS

ACT CONFIDENT

You might be shaking on the inside, but try to project an air of calm confidence. It takes time and practice, as with any skill, but it can make engagements easier.

TRY NEW THINGS

Shy people tend to avoid new situations, but confronting that fear of the unknown can help your overall self-confidence in other situations.

OWN YOUR SHYNESS

Being shy is part of who you are, but it also doesn't define you. Remember, it's just one trait that makes up a very individual person.

RE-FRAME YOUR THINKING

Rather than worrying about how shy you are in social situations, focus on your strong points, such as being a good listener or a loyal friend.

STAY PRESENT

It's easy to drift into our thoughts when we're anxious, but stay in the moment and mindful of what's happening around you. It can help you stay calm and focused.

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Top 10 SELF-ESTEEM HACKS

Aimee Longos reveals some simple strategies for improving your self-esteem and generating a positive mindset

WORDS AIMEE LONGOS

HOW TO SILENCE THE BULLY WITHIN

Inner speech is the running commentary each of us engages in as we go about our daily lives. Often this inner voice is compassionate and positive, helping us to make sense of the world, but it can also be self-deprecating and critical. If our inner critic becomes too vocal, it can distort our view of ourselves, leading to low self-esteem. Challenging your inner critic, and positively re-framing what it says, can help you to re-train your inner voice to be more realistic in its appraisal.

For example, when your inner critic says "I'm too stupid to get this", ask yourself: how likely is it that this is actually true? What evidence do you have to the contrary? Then, you can re-frame this thought into something more positive, such as: "This is hard, but I'm determined to get it".

It can take time and practice to transform your inner critic, so try writing your challenges and responses down to help you work on them. The important thing is to start noticing when your inner critic is being too negative, and to interrupt it before it takes over. By doing so habitually, you'll find yourself becoming more confident in your sense of self and your own abilities.

LET GO

Holding on to too much negativity in our lives can be mentally exhausting, often leaving us feeling low about ourselves. By letting go of this ill feeling, we can improve our sense of self.

Write a list of the negative things in your life – maybe it's a friend who is often judgemental, a bad habit that you constantly berate yourself for, or a view you have about yourself which could be getting in the way of you participating in and enjoying certain activities.

Once you have your list, it's time to remove these negatives from your life. Actively make a change to spend less time with those who don't make you feel your best, or let them know how their criticism affects you.

Consciously adjust your habits and routine to ensure that you stop doing those things you beat yourself up for, or better yet, tell yourself it doesn't matter, that everyone has quirks and these are yours! In terms of any negative thoughts you have about yourself that may be holding you back, ask yourself whether they make your life better. If the answer is no, it's time to let them go and stop allowing them to impact the way you feel about yourself.

BE YOUR OWN CHEERLEADER

It may be easy to champion the successes of others, but often we shy away from openly praising ourselves. We can struggle to be positive about our own achievements, especially when our inner critic steps in to undermine them and point out our flaws. But being positive about, and celebrating ourselves is good for self-esteem.

Try applying how you champion others to yourself by writing down or talking about your achievements in the third person, for example: "Sarah nailed her work presentation today, even though she normally hates speaking in front of a big group".

Addressing yourself in this way helps you create some distance from any negative commentary that may be going on in the background, and allows you to show compassion to yourself, rather than judgement.

By building this kind of self-talk into your daily routine, starting your day by reminding yourself of a positive quality or achievement – and doing the same at the end of the day – you can get into the habit of focusing on your strengths rather than your shortcomings. It may feel strange at first, but ultimately by being your own cheerleader, you can gain a new perspective on your own abilities and improve your self-worth.

USE POSITIVE AFFIRMATIONS

Positive affirmations may seem like the sort of token sentiments reserved strictly for greetings cards, but when used correctly, they can be a simple yet powerful way of reminding yourself of your worth. The key is finding the ones that work for you personally, and not to set the bar too high, which if you are already struggling with low self-esteem could actually reinforce any negative opinions you may have about yourself.

When choosing your affirmations, make them specific, realistic, and – above all – honest. Aim for something that doesn't feel too out of reach, or too at odds with how you are currently feeling. This may even mean starting out with more neutral affirmations before stepping it up to increasingly positive ones. So perhaps saying "There will be be good days and bad, but I always keep going" will work much better for you than "Nothing can stop me".

Once you have your affirmations, write these down – on sticky notes around the house, on your desk at work, or put them in your bag – to serve as daily little reminders of your strengths and potential. And don't forget to regularly write new ones that reflect where you are on your journey as your confidence begins to grow. »

SURROUND YOURSELF WITH LOVING RELATIONSHIPS

The benefits of having a strong and meaningful social network can be far-reaching and long-lasting. Research shows that spending time with other people is good for our physical health – increasing our immunity, illness recovery rates, and longevity. Social relationships also sustain us emotionally, improving our outlook on life, reducing stress, and helping us to feel good about ourselves.

Why not make a list of those people in your life who always lift you up, and schedule a conversation, video call or some upcoming time together with these individuals? It's a great way to instantly reap the benefits these relationships bring to your life. If you're feeling particularly low, or stuck in a pattern of negativity, confide in a close friend or family member that you might need a reminder of what you bring to their lives, or of a time you've helped them out. Those who love and care for you will be happy to support you and remind you exactly why you're so important to them!

And if you struggle with accepting compliments, try training yourself to say "thank you," and fight the urge to rebuff these compliments, as this will help you interrupt any negative internal commentary.

DON'T COMPARE

Comparing ourselves to others can be a useful way of setting goals and building motivation. However, when we get stuck on the idea that the grass is greener on another person's side, then no matter who or what we compare ourselves to, we are always the one who comes up short.

To avoid making comparisons that leave you feeling bad about yourself, try some perspective-taking. Think about someone you often compare yourself to. Now remind yourself that you can't ever experience their life, and that you have no proof it is better than yours. Go even further and consider that perhaps this person compares themselves to you, and feels that your life is in fact the one that's better?

It's also wise to take a break from social media, and avoid or mute those profiles that you find particularly triggering when it comes to making negative comparisons.

Remember, what you see outwardly is not necessarily reflective of the reality of a situation. Once you shift your perspective to account for this, you'll find you stop automatically assuming that you are inferior in some way to someone else, and start feeling more confident about yourself.

GET A DOSE OF MOOD-BOOSTING ENDORPHINS

Endorphins are hormones that trigger positive feelings. A sure-fire way to get a quick burst of these feel-good hormones is to exercise.

Exercise increases our heart rate, which puts our body systems under stress. In response to this, our brain sends a message to flick that endorphin switch to 'on' – flooding our body with these little mood-boosters. Once released, endorphins reduce our perception of pain and trigger feelings of exhilaration that leave both our mind and body energised.

As little as 15 minutes of aerobic exercise (increasing your breathing and heart rate) is enough to release endorphins and leave you feeling more positive, both about the world and yourself. What's more, studies have consistently shown that when we exercise regularly we suffer less from stress, anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.

If you struggle with the motivation to exercise, try buddying up with a friend to help encourage each other, or try a guided class – in person or online – to keep you on track. Finding an activity you enjoy and taking part in it several times a week will ensure you get a hit of endorphins regularly, helping to keep your self-confidence up. You might even meet some new people!

DRESS TO IMPRESS

'When you feel your worst, look your best' is advice often repeated to those struggling with self-esteem – but how much substance is there behind this saying?

Wearing an item you've worn previously on a happy occasion, or something you've been complimented on, could noticeably increase your confidence. This is because of the positive memories we have made while wearing these items. When we wear them again, it triggers these memories, bringing us comfort by reconnecting us with the meaningful times and people in our lives.

So when you find yourself feeling a little low, it's time to whip out something in your wardrobe that you have a strong positive association with. Maybe it's a well-worn jumper gifted to you by a treasured relative, a t-shirt you got after seeing your favourite band, or that dress you wore to a celebration where everyone complimented you on it.

Whatever you choose, wearing something you have a strong positive memory about acts as a bit of armour, a buffer from any negative thoughts and feelings, helping you to re-shape how you feel about yourself and restore your confidence.

MAKE TIME FOR SELF-CARE

Sometimes we get so busy that we overlook our own needs, which can leave us feeling drained and overwhelmed.

Self-care is when you take time out from whatever you think you 'should' be doing to have a moment that's just for you, giving your mind the opportunity to rest and replenish.

If we take care of our mind, it can cope better with the stresses and emotional strains of whatever life throws at us. When we are more resilient, we are less likely to suffer from stress and anxiety, and to feel bad about ourselves. Try and see self-care as an investment in boosting your self-esteem.

Start getting into the habit of carving out time every day, even if it's only ten minutes, that's just for you. Paint your nails, take a walk, listen to music, read a favourite book, do some yoga, or have a bubble bath. Whatever it is that personally gives you time to reset and leaves you feeling rejuvenated, make time for it.

It's also important to try not to think of this activity as an indulgence or treat. Self-care is fundamental to our mental wellbeing and our relationships with ourselves and others, just as exercise and nutrition are essential for physical health.

NURTURE YOUR STRENGTHS

Finding opportunities to do the things we are good at is beneficial for our mental wellbeing in so many ways.

In the short term, you may get a quick fix. You have completed what you set out to do – go you! – so you are positively rewarded, whether by praise (being told a job well done), or by a physical reward (paid for work/offered a promotion etc). This helps to instil pride, and nurtures our sense of self.

In the long term, when we can demonstrate true proficiency in areas that are meaningful and impactful to us individually, it helps us to develop strong self-esteem. It shows us that we are useful, and that we have the ability to make a contribution to the world.

Whether it's in your leisure and family time, or in your career, finding ways to use your strengths will stop those negative thoughts and doubts about your own worth creeping in.

If you feel unsure of what you're good at, try making a list, or asking a friend or loved one to tell you what they think. It could be something as small as cooking great burritos, or everyone admiring the crochet projects you make. Once you know your strengths, you can start seeking out opportunities to demonstrate them, establishing a strong foundation for your self-worth that you can continue to build on.

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DEVELOP A *positive* BODY IMAGE

How do you feel about your body? Transformational coach Alison Morgan uncovers the power of gaining a fresh perspective of yourself

WORDS ALISON MORGAN

Our bodies are truly amazing. Carrying us, keeping us alive, creating new life, healing wounds... the list goes on. But these are all things we tend to take for granted and, as amazing as we are, we often struggle to see ourselves in a positive light.

In a social-media-frenzied world, often showing the 'perfect' life or body, having a positive image about our own bodies seems to be increasingly challenging. In one click, it's easy to be thrown into a scenario of comparing ourselves with others and wishing we had the perfect legs, bum or lips (take your pick!), and if we're not careful, it can lead to a downward spiral of self-loathing, low confidence and a negative body image, which can impact all areas of our lives.

As much as we know it's healthy and important for us to have a positive view of our own body, many of us struggle with this daily act of self-acceptance and compassion. So how would life be different if we liked or even loved our bodies a little bit more, and how can we achieve this?

What does a 'positive body image' really mean?

We all see things in different ways, and the concept of a 'positive body image' is no different. It's about how you perceive yourself. Think of it as:

How you see your body

How you feel about your body

The thoughts you have about your body

The things you do that result from this self-perception

Think about how you perceive yourself on a scale of 0-10, rather than simply seeing yourself either positively or negatively. This will probably change on a weekly, daily and even hourly basis due to things happening around you, but the more you start to become aware of how you're feeling about yourself, the better placed you are to take action to move the scale towards confidence, more of the time. Think baby steps more frequently, rather than giant leaps less often.

This isn't about seeing yourself as perfect – perfect doesn't exist. It's also not a destination that you get to and stay at. It's an ongoing work in progress, much like physical fitness; it's something that needs regular attention to make lasting differences and for you to feel more comfortable in your own skin.

To love or to loathe?

We only get one body to carry us through our lives. It's the only thing that you will spend your whole life with, and you have a choice: look after it, nourish it and learn to love it, or waste precious time and energy loathing it, beating yourself up and comparing yourself to others. You wouldn't say negative things to your friends, so why say them to yourself?

True, long-lasting, deep confidence and a healthy perception of your body comes from within. It comes from you accepting yourself, treating yourself kindly, working on being a healthier you, and having positive opinions and beliefs about yourself. It's always lovely to receive compliments from people, but you can't live off these forever. They should be nice to have, not necessary to have.

Living with a negative body image can drain us, control us, and steal our happiness and enthusiasm for living life.

Improving your attitude towards yourself may just turn up your happiness dial. It might not be an easy journey, but wonderful things will happen if you give it a go! What have you got to lose?

A more positive mindset

Being more positive about ourselves more of the time sounds simple, but in reality it can take some work and commitment. Here are some simple areas to start thinking about:

> "MANY OF US STRUGGLE WITH THIS DAILY ACT OF SELF-ACCEPTANCE"

Develop a healthy attitude towards yourself

Developing a healthy, positive attitude towards yourself as a whole, complete human being may mean a shift in mindset, but it is achievable. Nothing positive comes from a negative mindset, and the sooner you start practising this through making small shifts, the sooner you will feel the benefits. Everything is in your power to change; you simply need to believe in yourself.

Explore your thoughts and feelings about your body

Learning to shake off negative beliefs and opinions about yourself may help you move »

WRITE DOWN ALL THE THINGS YOU LOVE ABOUT YOUR BODY

towards a place of acceptance and respect for your body. Learning to tune in to the thoughts that chatter away in our heads, and learning to have the courage to face the negative ones rather than avoid them, is an important stage in the healing process.

Take action that works for you
On your journey to becoming more positive about your body image, you'll find the things that work best for you. Face the challenge with a learning mindset and be comfortable with taking action and trying new things. Stick with them and build up your toolkit, so when you feel your confidence slipping, you know what tool to pull out!

Put it into action
How often have you thought: 'When I lose this weight, I'll be more confident and happy'? Yes, you might be, but often the effect is short-lived. You're then looking for the next thing and the next. The trick is to start working on your body confidence now, and that starts with your mindset and becoming healthier and stronger physically and mentally at the same time.

Ready to get started? Begin with these simple actions...

Develop a healthy attitude towards yourself:

Accept yourself as the unique individual you are today. Don't let your mind wander back to the past or dream about the future. Practising mindfulness will help train your brain to be more focused on the present and reduce this time travel of your mind.

-

Focus on your own journey, rather than wasting time comparing yourself to others. You will never be them.

> "IT MAY REQUIRE A BIT OF TIME, TRIAL AND ERROR TO FIND WHAT WORKS FOR YOU, BUT IT'S WORTH IT"

Don't be mean, critical or judgemental to anyone – including yourself! Be kind, supportive and show compassion.

-

Work to improve yourself, but don't strive for perfection. Enjoy the journey you're on, learning what works for you, and be proud of every small achievement you make towards a healthier, stronger, more positive version of you.

-

Respect yourself and all that your body has taken you through so far in life. Write down three things you're grateful to your body for each day.

-

Put yourself first – develop a great relationship with yourself. If you don't, it's harder to have effective relationships with others.

-

Be so proud of yourself; you don't need compliments to make yourself feel better.

Explore your thoughts and feelings about your body:

Be curious about how you honestly feel about yourself, and try to go beyond 'I don't like my body'. Try closing your eyes and slowly focusing on each part of your body and see what thoughts, feelings and emotions arise.

-

Dig deep and try to understand why you feel that way. Can you link it back to something that happened in your past?

-

Develop the ability to tune in to the thoughts that regularly chatter away in your mind. Try keeping a journal to capture how you feel about your body daily. Notice any themes and things that trigger you to feel worse or better.

-

Notice when your mind wanders through the day to thoughts about your body. When you notice this has happened, try to focus back on the present moment, whatever you are doing, or your breathing.

We often avoid thoughts that are uncomfortable or painful. Instead, learn to observe them and how they make you feel. This isn't about solving them, but exploring them might bring new insight and reduce their power.

Take action that works for you:
It may require a bit of time, trial and error to find what works for you, but it's worth it. Building a personal toolkit of exercises to use when your thoughts are slipping to the negative will keep you on track to having a positive body image.

The long-term change will come from the internal work you do, but there's also fun stuff, like wearing great clothes that flatter you, treating yourself to a facial, or just spending time with loved ones. Have fun with it all and remember that true beauty is much more than skin deep.

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MAKE Me-time A MUST-DO

Feeling frazzled? By making a small amount of time for yourself, you'll be instantly refreshed – and happier

WORDS SHARON WALKER

When did you last have time to yourself? When 'mum's taxi' went on strike? The laundrette was off duty? The café you run alongside your *actual* job shut up shop? If that's the sound of your frazzled laugh, we're not surprised. But this is no laughing matter. Time to unwind is "like fuel in the tank," says psychologist Dr Jessamy Hibberd. "You need 'self-care' to function at your best," she adds. "We're not meant to be doing and thinking all of the time; we're not machines."

> "WE'RE NOT MEANT TO BE DOING AND THINKING ALL OF THE TIME; WE'RE NOT MACHINES"

Me-time isn't sitting in a bath surrounded by candles (although it can be). Self-care means going for a walk, meeting a friend or staying in bed; whatever you need to reboot. "Tune in to how you feel and go with it," suggests life coach Jayne Morris. The key is little and often.

Research shows that the resting brain is anything but idle. Downtime gives us time to process unresolved tensions and to gain perspective. Most of us can't simply down

DR JESSAMY HIBBERD
Dr Hibberd is a psychologist and co-author of the *This Book Will...* series.

JAYNE MORRISR
Jayne is a life coach and author of *Burnout to Brilliance*.

SUZY READING
Suzy is a psychologist and author of *The Self-Care Revolution*.

tools and nip off to a spa. But it *is* possible to carve out time for yourself. Here's how.

How to build your 'me-time muscle' in one minute
If you have one minute to spare at the bus stop or between work calls, put your phone on airplane mode and recharge with a hand massage. Stash a tube of your favourite lotion in your handbag and grab a moment whenever you can. First, rub a few drops into your hand to soften the skin. Use your thumb to work into the fleshy heel of your hand, palm side up, then flip your hand over and work into the web of tendons between your thumb and fingers, moving gently up and down to release tension. Next, move on to the joint at the base of each finger, massaging all the way to the tip. A hand massage is a really good stress-buster for anyone who taps away on a keyboard all day, but it's also the perfect me-time hack if you're standing in a queue or on public transport. "Smell is a powerful mood alchemist," says psychologist Suzy Reading.

TIP
Follow your hand massage with a simple breathing exercise, recommends Dr Hibberd. Breathe in for the count of four, hold for five, and out for six... and repeat.

10 minutes
Carve out 10 minutes for yourself by turning any daily activity into a meditation, whether that's taking a shower or getting ready for work. A simple shower can feel like a full spa treatment if you immerse yourself in the experience rather than worrying about to-do lists. Concentrate on the drops of water hitting your skin and use a deliciously uplifting body scrub to add extra zing. Reading suggests you can turn getting dressed into an act of self-care too. Forget grabbing a bunch of scrunched-up clothes from the back of your wardrobe – instead, take ten minutes to lay out your outfit carefully, picking out colours that lift your spirits.

TIP
For a relaxing break, eat a square of dark chocolate with a cup of hot tea – and don't do anything else. Focus on the taste, texture and smell, relishing the experience – and no multi-tasking! If you really must do something, write a list of the experiences, relationships and emotions you are grateful for.

20 minutes
Perhaps you're sitting on the train or waiting for an appointment – now's your chance to master the art of savouring. This is a lovely mind-wandering trick that Suzy Reading recommends, where you simply start to anticipate everything you're looking forward to, whether that's a coffee with a friend, a party or a holiday. You might also want to dip in to your mental archives to unleash some sunny memories. Researchers at Southampton University found that the odd detour down memory lane can significantly lift your spirits, and those who wrote about »

"IT'S THE PERFECT ME-TIME HACK IF YOU'RE STANDING IN A QUEUE OR ON PUBLIC TRANSPORT"

happy memories were happier after the exercise than those who didn't. But you don't need a notebook to do this, as the biggest mood spikes come by replaying happy memories in your head. "This kind of nourishment is accessible anywhere, at any time," says Reading. Focus on how positive you felt at the time of the experience, rather than how it's over now to stop the memories from feeling too poignant.

TIP

Make a 'happy times' photo album. Try to think about what happened outside the frame, before and after the photograph was taken – research shows that this gives the most uplifting effect. And share the album with the family and friends you were with. This will spark an opportunity to reminisce and boost the bond that already exists between you.

One hour

If you're at home, or work for a forward-thinking company, take a nap. That extra 40 winks will reduce anxiety, boost concentration and increase your energy. You'll also make wiser food choices, improve your memory and think more clearly. Jayne Morris recommends keeping a small pillow in your desk drawer (she used to bed down in empty meeting rooms when she worked for the BBC), and setting an alarm so you don't 'oversleep'. 15 minutes is best, according to sleep researcher Professor Jim Horne; any longer and you could descend into deep sleep and wake up groggy. If you can't make this happen, move your body instead. Go for a walk or try a yoga class in your lunch hour. You can always take a nap in the back row of the class if you're really shattered (another of Morris's 40-winks tricks). "Just warn the teacher you're taking a rest, so they don't worry there's something wrong," she says. If you work near a swimming pool, Morris recommends a dip as the most nurturing exercise. "There's an association with the womb, when all our needs were catered for, so it feels very soothing."

> "PICK SOMETHING THAT'S SPECIAL TO YOU AND WILL TAKE YOUR MIND OFF YOUR WORRIES"

TIP

Block out an hour before bed to create a wind-down routine. Log out from social media, have a bath, listen to music or read. "I write a list of the good things that have happened," says Dr Hibberd. "It reminds you of what you have and helps you appreciate your life instead of worrying about what you don't have or haven't achieved."

An afternoon

If you're thinking you'll use your free afternoon to clear that email backlog – stop! See a friend instead; it will be better for your health and happiness. "Making time for friends and family is an important part of self-care," says Dr Hibberd. We're social creatures and need relationships like we need air and water. Don't want company? Go somewhere green – and take your shoes off. Yes, really. There's nothing like walking barefoot on the grass to put a spring in your step, believes Morris. "The moment we put our feet on the earth we become more aware of our breath. The deeper we breathe, the clearer we can think." And there's science to back this up. According to research at Harvard Medical School, breathing deeply helps re-oxygenate our cells, which in turn regulates our hormones.

TIP

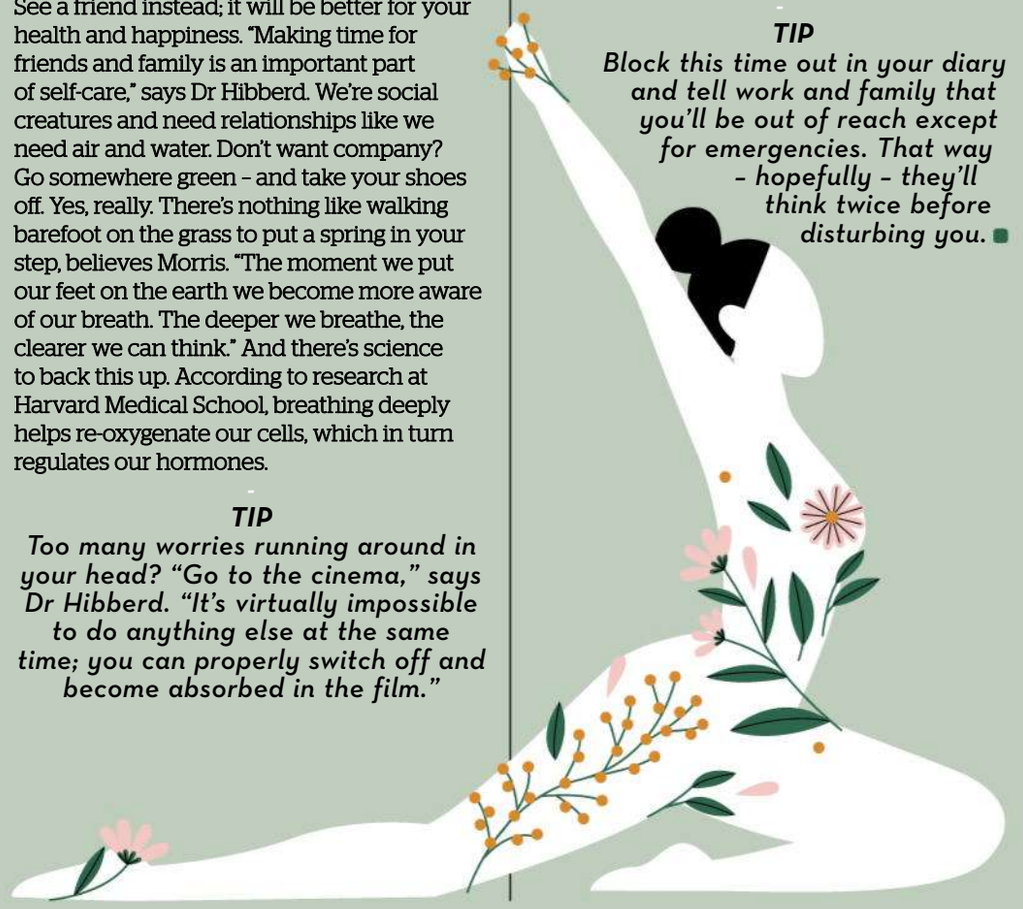
Too many worries running around in your head? "Go to the cinema," says Dr Hibberd. "It's virtually impossible to do anything else at the same time; you can properly switch off and become absorbed in the film."

A day

Take a quiet moment, close your eyes and focus inwards. Now ask yourself what would be the most beneficial way for you to spend your day. "Just see what comes," says Morris. You might want to connect with a friend, or if you're always with people – as working parents often are – solitude might be what you need. Dr Hibberd suggests planning a fun adventure, perhaps a day out to see a new art exhibition or a trip to the seaside. Pick something that's special to you and will take your mind off your worries. You might want to use the time to reset your priorities. Morris recommends taking five Post-its and writing down the five things most important to you, whether that's work, friends, family or hobbies. Put them in order of importance, then reorder according to the time you spend on each. "People often find work is number one in terms of time, but that might be the least important of their priorities," says Morris. "This shows where things are out of whack and you can spend some time thinking about how you can change your situation."

TIP

Block this time out in your diary and tell work and family that you'll be out of reach except for emergencies. That way – hopefully – they'll think twice before disturbing you.



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FIND YOUR Mantra

Focus your mind and learn how to reverse negative thought patterns by repeating powerful phrases

WORDS ALI HORSFALL

Positive affirmations have the power to transform your thinking. Mindfulness practitioner and author of *And Breathe...* Sarah Rudell Beach shows us how to make a mantra work for you.

Words of wisdom

Mantras are words and phrases that can focus your mind and reverse negative thought patterns. "You can silently repeat them in your head whenever you need them throughout the day, or say them out loud if you find it helpful," says Sarah. "Once you discover the mantras that most resonate with you, write them down on a Post-it, or on your favourite stationery, and put them where you'll see them regularly such as on a mirror or your fridge."

Say it with ease

When choosing an affirmation it should feel comfortable and appropriate for the internal thoughts that you want to quieten. 'I don't need to be perfect', 'I will look for the good', or 'I will focus on what I can control', are good examples. "If a mantra doesn't feel right to you," says Sarah, "modify it."

> "DISCOVER THE MANTRAS THAT RESONATE WITH YOU"

TRY THESE POWER PHRASES DURING YOUR DAY

MORNING AFFIRMATION

'I'll handle what today brings'

"When we get upset because things don't go to plan, it's often because we weren't aware of our plan in the first place," says Sarah. Think about what you're expecting today, so you can skilfully meet the moments that don't deliver.

MIDDAY REMINDER

'I can do this'

When things get tough during your day, repeat this mantra. "You've done hard things before. Know that whatever it is you're facing, you already have everything you need to handle it," Sarah explains. "You have your presence, your attention, and your breath. You've got this."

EVENING MANTRA

'I did my best today'

Use this mantra before bed. "Reflect on what was good," says Sarah, "what was hard, and who you helped or who helped you."

WHY WE SHOULD ALL BE MORE Selfish

Putting yourself first has more benefits to you and even the people around you than you might realise

WORDS SARAH BANKES

From a very young age, we're told to be kind, to share, to see things from other people's viewpoints, to put others first and to be polite, amongst many other life lessons. And while these are important skills to learn – equipping us with qualities that turn us into decent human beings – taking these instructions to the extreme can actually be detrimental to our own mental health and wellbeing.

As children, we probably remember our parents coming out with the following sorts of phrases (and as parents we're probably guilty of repeating these to our own children):

"Give Grandpa a kiss goodbye, go on, don't be rude..."

"I know you don't like mushrooms, but we're guests, so eat up..."

Telling kids to do things they really don't want to do doesn't make us bad parents – nor does it make our parents wicked for doing the same – but it does send out a message that other people's feelings are more important than our own. Coupled with the idea that to be selfish is a negative trait, we're brought up to believe that to be a good person, we must at all times be selfless, altruistic and self-sacrificing, and these beliefs lead to a whole host of problems.

We can't blame our parents for everything, though. A study carried out in 2016/17 by a team from University of California, Los Angeles suggests that altruistic behaviour might actually be the default option in our brains. According to their research, an area of the prefrontal cortex can be specifically affected to make people less giving.

> "PRIORITISING YOUR NEEDS CAN BENEFIT EVERYONE INVOLVED"

What's wrong with being selfless?

Excessive selflessness leads to an inability to say no. We live

in fear of appearing rude and upsetting or offending people. As we go about our lives pleasing everybody else, if we don't burn out first, we run the risk of ultimately becoming bitter, resentful and pretty unhappy, as prioritising everybody else leaves little time to do the things we want to do.

Perhaps a distinction needs to be made between good and bad versions of selfishness. A total disregard for other people's feelings isn't always necessary when it comes to putting yourself first. However, being aware of your needs and being assertive enough to prioritise them can benefit everyone involved.

For example, a friend asks you to go shopping and, even though you already have a busy schedule and want to say no, you say yes because you don't want to let her down. What happens? You end up being late because you're squeezing it in around other things. Consequently you're stressed before you've even stepped foot inside a shop; you spend the entire trip annoyed with your friend for 'dragging you along', when actually you could have said no; and you're anxious about the next commitment in your jam-packed diary! What would the outcome have been if you'd said no? You'd feel less stressed, for sure, you'd have more time to focus on the other things you're doing that day, and you wouldn't resent your friend. And the friend? She might initially feel somewhat put out, but she wouldn't have to put up with a late, grumpy, stressed-out shopping companion! Being supposedly 'selfless' isn't always beneficial to the people you think you're helping out.

More often than not, the issue goes far deeper than wanting to please other people for *their* sake. If you'd considered the shopping situation rationally and truthfully, the friend could probably have found someone else to go with, so the real issue was perhaps not so much not wanting to let her down, but more about not wanting her to be disappointed in you. Being a people-pleaser is usually a result of seeking approval or wanting to be liked, which is often a consequence of previous life events.

Stress and anxiety are just two of the consequences of being excessively selfless. If you don't start prioritising your needs, you become ineffective at what you're trying to be, whether that's a good friend, a reliable employee or a good parent. This can then lead to low self-esteem, depression and burnout. Taking time out from the kids might feel like an indulgence but if a one-hour bubble bath is what you need to unwind and destress, your kids are going to be much happier with a relaxed parent than one who is trying to do everything for everyone, and not giving themselves a well-earned break.

Over the following pages, we talk to author and life coach Michelle Elman about how to prioritise your needs and set boundaries.

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WHY DON'T WE PLAY MORE?

It's time to embrace our inner child and bring more playfulness into our lives! And in the process, give our health and relationships a boost

WORDS JOSEPHINE HALL

Most of us spent many hours playing as children, whether it was daydreaming on our own, acting out scenes with toys, or chasing each other during breaks at school. We shrieked with laughter, covered our eyes and counted to ten, created entire imaginary worlds... and we often didn't need much instruction, or persuasion that play was a worthwhile and necessary activity.

But as we grow up, we place less and less importance on play. It starts to seem silly, a waste of precious time, or maybe even a little embarrassing.

However, in recent years, there seems to have been a shift in thinking, with adult play becoming more popular. The video game industry, which has adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s as its primary consumers, has grown. Role-playing games have also increased in popularity, and game conventions worldwide have reported

record attendance numbers. In 2007, Real Escape Game was developed in Japan by 35-year-old Takao Kato and since then 'escape rooms' – where teams of adults solve puzzles to escape a locked room within a time limit – have had increasing commercial success. In November 2019, there were estimated to be more than 50,000 escape rooms worldwide.

In a 2020 article for the British Psychological Society, researcher and board game designer Dave Neale wrote, "It has been claimed that we are in a golden age for board games. I would go further: we are in a golden age of play for adults."

What is 'adult play'?

Over the years, there have been many attempts to define what play is, but there are five characteristics that are widely agreed upon. Author and research professor Dr Peter Gray explained in 2013, "An activity can be characterised as play, or described as playful, to the degree that it contains the characteristics listed here: Play is activity that is self-chosen and self-directed; intrinsically motivated; guided by mental rules; imaginative; and conducted in an active, alert, but relatively non-stressed frame of mind."

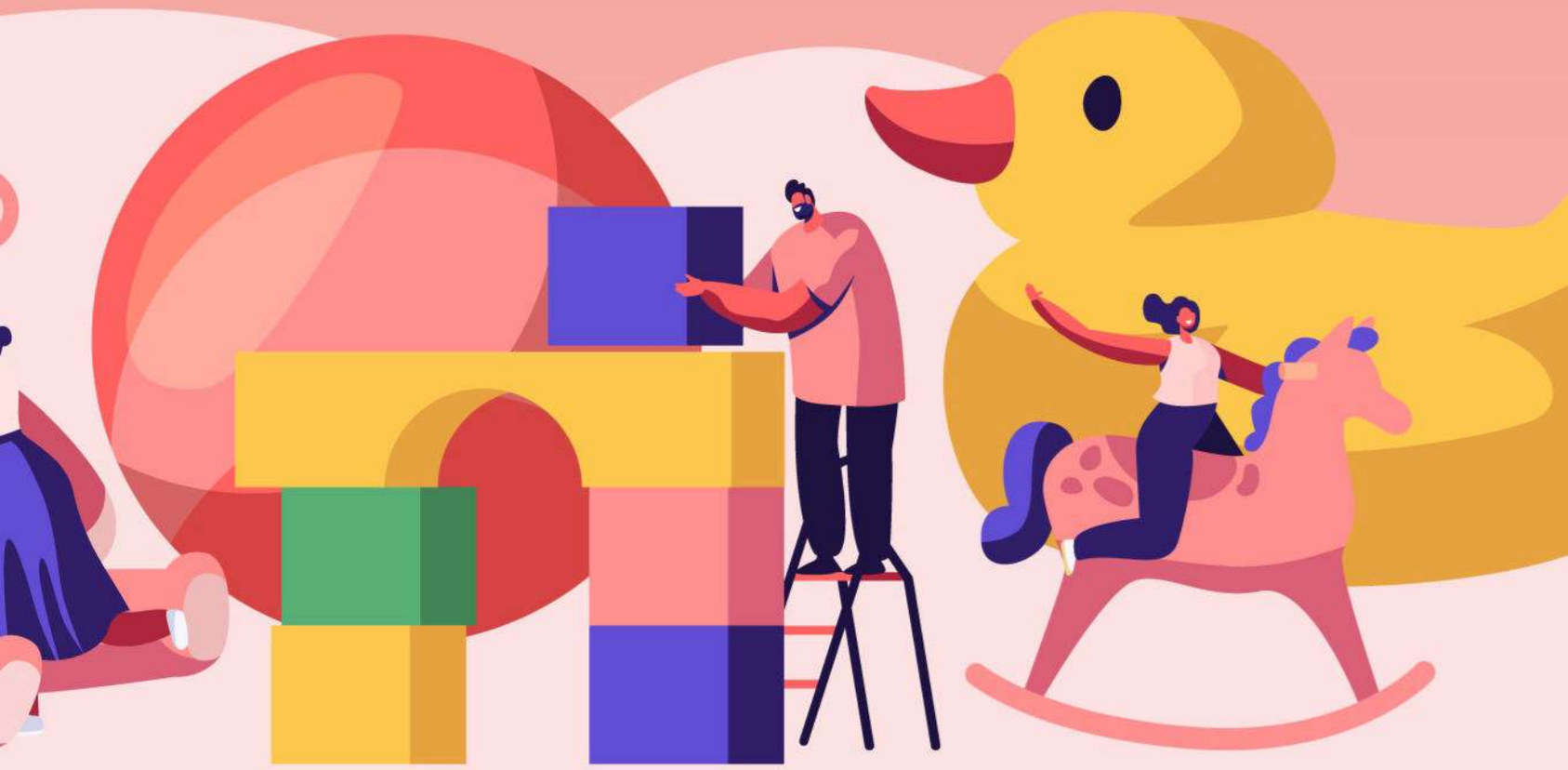
> "IT STARTS TO SEEM SILLY, A WASTE OF PRECIOUS TIME, OR MAYBE EVEN EMBARRASSING"

Dr Stuart Brown is an author, psychiatrist, doctor and founder of the National Institute for Play in the United States. He is reluctant to define play, comparing the idea to over-analysing a joke and taking the joy out of it. Instead, in his 2010 book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, he asks the reader to »

HOW DOES PLAY PROMOTE LEARNING?

In 1964, Dr Marian Diamond, a pioneering scientist and educator who would go on to be considered one of the founders of modern neuroscience, and her colleagues, published an exciting paper about brain growth in rats. The scientists separated pairs of rat siblings shortly after birth, placing one in an exciting, toy-filled colony and the other in solitary confinement.

They discovered that the rats raised in a playful environment had thicker cerebral cortices than the others. Subsequent research confirmed it – the rats raised in stimulating environments had bigger brains, and were able to find their way through mazes more quickly. In other words, they were more intelligent. Ethical considerations prevent similar experiments on humans, but it seems likely that our brains respond to play in similar ways. Some circumstantial evidence suggests similar: Chinese and Japanese students are among the best achievers in the world, and they take regular breaks every 50 minutes.



consider what the world would be like *without* play: "It's not just an absence of games or sports. Life without play is life without books, without movies, art, music, jokes, dramatic stories. Imagine a world with no flirting, no day-dreaming, no comedy, no irony." He goes on to compare play to oxygen, writing "...it's all around us, yet goes mostly unnoticed or unappreciated until it is missing."

How do we play?
In his TED Talk, *Play is more than just fun*, Dr Brown outlines the five play archetypes that he has observed during his years of research:

Rough-and-Tumble Play
Such as tug-of-war, scavenger hunts or dodge ball. Through this form of play, we develop emotional regulation as well as cognitive, emotional and physical mastery.

Ritual Play
Activities or sports with set rules and structures. It's through these activities that people come together for a common purpose or goal.

Imaginative Play
Colouring, storytelling, crafting or even improvisation classes or stand-up comedy. Imaginative play is about living out fantasies and honouring our instinctual creative nature.

Body Play
Dr Brown describes body play as "a spontaneous desire to get ourselves out of gravity." It includes activities like hiking, yoga, snorkelling or even just dancing around your home.

Object Play
This describes anything involving manipulation of objects, building or designing, such as playing with Lego, building fortresses or snowball fights.

IDEAS TO TRY

TRY A NEW SPORT

Give a new, fun, non-competitive sport a try. Pick something you would have enjoyed as a child, which is difficult to take too seriously, such as hula-hooping, rollerblading, rock-climbing, paddle-boarding, skipping with a rope or jumping over makeshift hurdles. Yoga is a form of exercise that encourages play, especially acro-yoga – a combination of yoga and acrobatics!

EXPERIMENT WITH A THEME

A themed night/day/hour could be a solo activity or something you do with your partner, family or group of friends. Choose a theme, such as a country or a time in history, and get into character. Pick the food you eat, the music you play, the clothes you wear, the activity you do, all according to the chosen theme.

DANCE

Make a playlist of your favourite songs to dance to. If you're unsure, you could search in places like Spotify or YouTube to find dancing playlists, or ask a friend. Clear some space, dim the lights, close the curtains or wear headphones if it'll help you to switch off the outside world. Then just let loose and go for it! Dance as if your life depends on it and, most importantly, enjoy yourself!

GET ARTY

Encourage your inner child by engaging in creative play that involves self-expression. This could be drawing, painting or colouring in – the end result is not what's important, but the process itself. Collaging can be a therapeutic activity. Use whatever you have around the house, get cutting and sticking, and have some fun! Or get out and about and take some photographs – you could even make a short film, or learn a new instrument.

WALK BAREFOOT OUTSIDE

As kids, we didn't think twice about running around without shoes. Barefoot walking has lots of proven mental and physical health benefits, and it encourages both mindfulness and playfulness. When we are in a state of play, we are fully existing in the present, rather than worrying about the past or the future. Of course, sometimes it's not safe or sanitary to do so. But if it is, throw off your shoes and embrace any urges for 'oohhs' and 'aahhs' as your toes sink into the feel of different textures and surfaces.

The benefits of adult play

Playing is widely credited as a vital part of children's development, important for their general health and wellbeing. But we don't always realise how much these benefits continue into adulthood. Here are just some of the reasons play is good for us, at any age:

Reduces stress
The more stressful our lives become, the more crucial it is to make time for play. It can release endorphins – the body's natural chemicals – that relieve pain, boost wellbeing, promote happiness and relieve stress.

Stimulates creativity and general brain function
Play has been shown to improve memory, stimulate the growth of the cerebral cortex and even trigger the secretion of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), a substance essential for the growth of brain cells. Playing also increases our imagination, which helps us to create new things, learn new skills, and problem solve. Just as young children learn best when playing, adults do too.

Improves social skills and connection to others
Playing with others tends to be fun. It can also increase our levels of empathy, trust, compassion and intimacy. It doesn't have to be a specific activity – adopting a playful state of mind could help us to cooperate, break the ice with strangers, or maintain existing relationships.

Increases productivity and reduces burnout at work
Google is well known for its inclusion of play in the workplace. Plenty of wall space to doodle on, and even staff play areas, help Google staff to be more productive. Regularly playing can help relieve the stress of deadlines and other work-related activities that cause tension.

Helps to keep us young
Play can boost energy levels and even improve our resistance to disease. As the playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, "We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."

Why don't adults play?

The right to play for children is specifically protected by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, but there's not an equivalent for adults. Although the mainstream popularity of intentional adult play seems to be increasing, it can still be seen as a luxury that many people feel they don't have the time, money or even right to partake in.

Also, as we gain more responsibilities and life begins to feel more serious, we tend to become more self-conscious or afraid of embarrassing ourselves.

At the 2008 Serious Play conference, designer Tim Brown spoke about the powerful relationship between creative thinking and play. He began his talk by doing an exercise that Bob McKim, a creativity researcher, used to do with his students. He asked them to draw the person who sat next to them, in just 30 seconds. There was a lot of laughter as Brown's audience showed each other their drawings, as well as a lot of 'I'm sorry', which Brown said happens every time this experiment is done with adults.

With children, on the other hand, it's a different story: "If you try the same exercise with kids, they have no embarrassment at all," Brown explains. "But as they learn to become adults, they become much more sensitive to the opinions of others, and they lose that freedom... And in studies of kids playing, it's been shown time after time that kids who feel secure, who are in a kind of trusted environment – they're the ones that feel most free to play."

The same goes for adults. If somebody is experiencing difficult living circumstances, then taking time out to play could well feel impossible. Dr Stuart Brown spoke on the *On Being* podcast in 2014, and described how play "emerges innately and spontaneously if the individual... is safe and well fed."

Encouragingly, there are organisations such as Clowns Without Borders who bring their playful performances and activities to places around the world where day-to-day life is a tremendous struggle, such as refugee camps and crisis zones.

> "THERE ARE STEPS WE CAN TAKE TO CREATE MORE PLAY TIME"

How can we insert more playfulness into our lives?

For most of us, there are simple steps we can take to create more play time:

Give yourself permission
Remember that play is important for our health and wellbeing. Allow yourself to do it, in some way, every day.

It's all about perception
You might need to change how you think about play. Play could be something like talking to your dog while cooking as if you're presenting a cookery show, or making up a silly song while you shower each morning.

Learn about your own play history
In his book Play, *Dr Brown suggests that readers "mine [their past] for play memories." Think about what you did for fun as a child, consider whether you did it alone or with others. How can you re-create something similar today?*

Play with your loved ones
Insert playfulness into your interactions with your friends and family, and in romantic relationships, and see how it changes how you feel about each other and your time together. If you have kids in your life, follow their lead! As Dr Brown writes, "Play is the purest expression of love."

Let play refresh your life
We all deserve to forget about our work, responsibilities and troubles for some time each day. Play can help us to do that. Follow your instincts and your curiosities, and let play insert a fresh sense of energy and wonder into your life.

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Set Yourself FREE OF THE PAST

When you liberate yourself from the ties that bind you, you'll never look back…

WORDS CHRISTABEL SMITH

We can all relate to Freddie Mercury blasting out 'I Want to Break Free' – deep down, who doesn't want to shake off their shackles and soar towards a world with no limits? But somehow it just isn't that easy. We put it down to our past, other people or circumstances, but the truth is, all that's holding us back is the voice inside our own head. Happily, we have the power to shut that nagging old parrot up, and listen to something much kinder instead. Follow these ideas to make a start.

Stop sabotaging yourself

Do you sometimes feel you're your own worst enemy? Perhaps you buy that bag you can't really afford, eat doughnuts after a workout at the gym, wake up hungover before a job interview, or put off saying yes to a potentially exciting date. Coach Kim Morgan (barefootcoaching.co.uk) says it's self-sabotaging behaviour and many people use it in a misguided attempt to protect themselves from difficult experiences and emotions. The way through is to understand what drives your behaviour. You may feel deep down that you don't deserve that fulfilling job, healthy body or loving relationship.

Do it Write down examples of happy relationships in your life past or present, work successes, or times you've felt good about the way you look. It's the first step to turning negative beliefs 'positive', which, in time, leads to stronger self-belief.

Get rid of pesky ANTs

We all have those annoying earworms with a harsh, critical voice that tell us we're not good/slim/clever enough; that we're a bad parent/partner/child/employee. Psychologists call them Automatic Negative Thoughts (ANTs), and acknowledging and challenging them can be very helpful. For example, imagine yourself rushing and spilling tea on the carpet. You berate yourself: 'I get everything wrong!' Now take that thought to court. Where is the evidence that that statement is true? Isn't it fairer to say you don't generally drop drinks? The verdict is, we all slip up, especially when we're stressed, and the simple learning is to give ourselves more time in future.

Do it When an ANT invades your head, Emily Bradley (founder of the blog imperfectdivablog.wordpress.com) suggests trying the STOP technique. Stop. Take a breath (a deep one – five counts in, five out). Observe how you're feeling. Then notice how the world is still spinning.

Forgive to flourish

During Nelson Mandela's 27 years in prison, he wrote, 'To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others'. He forgave his captors. We can't all be Nobel Peace Prize-winners, but we can cut off the oxygen supply to old demons and watch them fade away. To heal, you need to release the emotion in whatever way it takes, whether that's yelling, crying or bashing a pillow. Next, try to understand why someone acted as they did. Compassion heals wounds.

Do it Combining mind and body can release emotional blockers, says psychologist Nina Dhiman. Do 'the woodchopper'. Standing with your legs apart, put your hands together above your head (this is your axe). Inhale. As you exhale, bring your arms down fast, as if chopping wood, flopping forwards from your waist and releasing a loud 'Aah!' as you do so.

Learn to be an imperfectionist

Perfection is impossible for any human, yet we all fall into the trap of seeking it. Who in all honesty can claim to have the ideal work-life-love balance, a dust-free home and A* children with sparkling teeth? Aiming for it and inevitably failing can lead us to feeling worthless and too scared to try anything, in case we don't excel.

Do it Embrace the Japanese concept of 'wabi-sabi', which finds beauty in the seemingly imperfect. Your child may be struggling at school, but they have so much else to give and be celebrated for. As a singer, Emily Bradley urges imperfectionists to create a 'blooper reel' (imaginary, written down or recorded), as a celebration of our off-notes or banana-slip moments, without which we'd learn nothing.

Stop worrying about what 'they' will say

One of the most undermining forces we face is the fear of what other people might think of us. Who we really are gets drowned out if we obsess over what 'they' will say. Imagine you're at a vintage market stall and fall in love with a wacky hat or some funky purple boots. You hanker after them, but find yourself wondering what your friends would think, or your neighbour, or the person who works in your local shop. Check yourself. Would you judge others so harshly? No. So don't be stifled. What's the worst that can happen?

Do it If you've always wanted to join a street protest or wanted a bright pink car, go for it. As Emily Bradley suggests, 'Chances are, the people whose judgement you're so worried about won't turn a hair.'

© Getty Images / Angelina Bambina

THE Courage TO BE VULNERABLE

How can we embrace vulnerability to live more fulfilling lives?

WORDS JULIA WILLS

Humans have always needed to connect with one another. Indeed, for most of our history, fitting in with the group has been essential to survival by greatly improving our chances against food shortage, predators and enemies through co-operating. A safety in numbers. But even today in our modern, sophisticated and technologically savvy world, that instinct remains strong. We're still social animals.

From the moment we're born, we appeal to our parents for food, warmth, love and shelter. As babies we need our carers to respond to our every need to stay alive. We are vulnerable. We don't pretend – we let others know what we need by crying and demanding attention. We're real. Authentic to our feelings. But as we grow up, we become more aware of what others might think of us when we share our true needs and feelings, and we learn to respond to signals of how we're loved best – perhaps by showing good manners, being kind, liking certain things or achieving high grades at school; in short, by becoming the 'nice person' that people will like. In doing so, we often showcase the best side of ourselves to friends, family and colleagues, choosing to keep our less 'likeable' feelings to ourselves. In this way, we learn to forfeit being wholly true to ourselves in order to fit in. But is that the most fulfilling way to live?

Brené Brown, a research professor at the University of Houston, thinks not. For the last two decades she has studied vulnerability, shame, courage and empathy. She's written six *New York Times* bestsellers, hosted the podcasts *Unlocking Us* and *Dare to Lead* and shared some of her discoveries in Netflix's *The Call to Courage*. Refreshingly, she simply describes herself in three words: researcher, storyteller, Texan. In her TED Talk, 'The Power of Vulnerability', she candidly shares how she was drawn to social work, leaving a career in management at AT&T to search for a way to mend people's lives and fix the systems supporting them. Instead, she discovered that social work was about "leaning into the discomfort" and allowing others to find their own way. As a born 'fixer', it wasn't for her. Instead, armed with the knowledge from her academic studies that connection gives meaning to our lives, she chose to research that. However, what she discovered was that her research subjects insisted on talking about disconnection instead: broken hearts, being let down by others, isolation and shame.

> "WE LEARN TO FORFEIT BEING WHOLLY TRUE TO OURSELVES IN ORDER TO FIT IN"

Not good enough

Shame is something we all feel – save for those individuals who are unable to feel any human empathy – and it can eat away at us, telling us that we are simply not thin enough, rich enough, smart enough, fashionable enough, young enough, mature enough, pretty enough, athletic enough – anything at all enough – to be part of the group. Of course, our modern world is complicit in making us feel our perceived shortcomings.

Every day, advertisements suggest what we might need to worry about before promising that their product is all we need to fix us, make us better and help us fit in more happily. Social media offers us the golden opportunity to play the comparison game 24/7, enabling us to measure our own lives against posts of others pictured in their best moments, encouraging us to fret about how we square up against our friends and celebrities. Not to mention the way we crave ever more likes on our posts as more proof of acceptance, but cringe when someone publicly disagrees with us or, worse, calls us wrong or stupid.

Brown says that shame nurtures an "excruciating vulnerability" within us. It's a psychological barrier that stands in the way of truly connecting with others. In continuing her research, she has become a world expert on vulnerability and, moreover, in revealing that by choosing to nurture and share it with others, we can live better. It's this groundbreaking work that she shares in her TED Talk 'The Power of Vulnerability' and her book, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent and Lead.* »

VULNERABILITY IS NOT...

WEAKNESS

Brown defines vulnerability as "uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure." So, it's little wonder that sharing feelings like sadness might make us feel uncomfortable and somehow 'less than' others. Yet that same vulnerability enables us to feel happy things too, like love. After all, falling in love definitely comes with plenty of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. But just look at what it can bring in return.

OVERSHARING

Vulnerability isn't about attention seeking. It's not in the blaring headlines of another newspaper exclusive about a celebrity's broken heart. Brown explains that vulnerability is about sharing our true feelings with those people who deserve to know.

A SOLO EFFORT

We need the support of others to help nurture our vulnerability. But the good news is that sharing is contagious. Research done by Fuda & Badham (2011) revealed that showing our vulnerability to others inspires them to do the same.

Shame resilience

Some of us are more resilient to the shame we feel, a discovery that prompted Brown to investigate why. She called these shame-resilient people "wholehearted" and found that whilst they understood shame and its impact on us, what set them apart was their sense of feeling worthy of love and belonging despite this. Moreover, wholehearted people kept that sense of worthiness alive inside them no matter what life threw at them. She summed up their way of living as believing, 'Yes, I am imperfect and vulnerable and sometimes afraid, but that doesn't change the truth that I am also brave and worthy of love and belonging'. Essentially, 'I am enough'.

Of course, as she points out, this doesn't just magically happen. It's something we have to work at. Wholehearted people, she discovered, lived their lives with courage, compassion and connection each day. The courage to be who they really are, the compassion they show to themselves and others and the commitment to building genuine connections. Importantly, they "identify vulnerability as the catalyst." However, these findings weren't without personal cost to Brown. Comparing how she was living her own life to the way wholehearted people lived theirs unravelled her and she sought therapy.

How to develop resilience to shame

Whilst Brown believes that shame is simply too powerful to be overcome, developing a resilience to it is possible. Her research highlighted four things that can help us to do this:

Becoming mindful of shame and aware of what sets it off

–

Listening to what it's telling you. Are its messages about who you are and what you're doing really accurate?

–

Connecting with others to share your feelings

–

Talking about it

As Brown points out, these things feel like the opposite of what you want to do. You're more likely to want to hide or appease or get angry. Her answer, however, is to "trust the process." She shares how she deals with her own shame attacks: talking to someone she trusts, treating herself with the same compassion she'd treat someone she loved and "owning the story" – that is, accepting what's happened and choosing her way through it. By talking to people close to you, by asking them to listen, you may find them sharing similar experiences, therefore making that essential connection

of showing empathy, and reminding you that you're not on your own. But it's in starting the conversation that takes the 'daring greatly' of her book title; the deep breath, the willingness to drop the façade and step out.

So, vulnerability is a good thing?

Most of us have come to regard vulnerability as a bad thing. A sign of weakness. Our Achilles' Heel. The Kryptonite that drains Superman's powers. The sunlight that turns Dracula to dust. The flaw that ultimately brings us down, whether warrior, superhero or immortal creature.

Yet Brown has discovered through both her research and her own personal life that engaging with our vulnerability brings us all the good things we really do want to have in our world – things like joy and love and contentment. Vulnerability, she concludes, is "the source of hope, empathy, accountability, and authenticity."

Daring to show up

Brown readily acknowledges that showing our vulnerability makes us uncomfortable. How could it not when it grows from emotions like sadness or disappointment or perhaps having done something wrong? All the things we'd prefer to keep tucked away to remain looking great on the outside.

Yet listening to her talk about vulnerability is empowering; the idea of "daring to show up and let ourselves be seen." She makes the point that, essentially, unless we engage with our vulnerability and the uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure that it's comprised of, then we cannot truly engage with others. And we need to start now. We simply don't have time to wait until things are absolutely right for us to take up the challenges in our lives, start a relationship with someone, change jobs or have that difficult conversation. In waiting, she says, "We ultimately sacrifice relationships and opportunities that may not be recoverable." For her, stepping into those situations, without guarantees, without knowing what will happen and risking the possible hurt, is a measure of courage: courage through vulnerability. So, how can we do it?

Becoming vulnerable

The answer, Brown says, is to lose the "vulnerability armoury," and to drop our weaponry. That's easier said than done, so it's heartening to know that she struggles too. Yet, by persevering she has found strategies that work, including:

BELIEVE 'I AM ENOUGH'

Recognising that we've had enough of comparing, ranking and endlessly trying to do better than others is a great first step. We can then allow ourselves to be seen and heard and know that we are enough just as we are.

DROP THE PERFECT

Perfect doesn't exist. So, aiming for it, as a perfectionist, sets us up to failure and disappointment and – yes, you've guessed it – more shame.

NURTURE SELF-COMPASSION

This is about accepting that we're human, that we have flaws and choosing to show ourselves the same understanding and support that we'd give a good friend. Sure, we mess up, but we are still worthy of love and connection.

LET YOURSELF FEEL YOUR EMOTIONS

Don't try to numb the bad stuff in order to feel better. Whether it's food, gambling, alcohol, shopping or medication drugs that take the edge off feeling down, disappointed or fearful, the problem is that numbing doesn't differentiate. We can't numb the emotions we don't want and still hang on to the ones we do, like joy and happiness and feeling grateful for all the good things that are in our lives.

EMBRACE JOY

Living with a sense of not being good enough can make us wonder if we actually deserve joy when it »

> "ENGAGING WITH VULNERABILITY BRINGS US ALL THE GOOD THINGS WE REALLY DO WANT"

SHAME ON YOU

Although nearly everybody feels shame, Brown discovered some clear differences in what sparks the feeling in men and women. For women, it's about how they look, with feelings around motherhood coming close behind (something that affects non-mothers too). Worse, however well women are accomplishing the things in their life, there's still the unspoken need to be natural and modest about it all. Don't show off. Stay sweet. For men, it's about being seen as strong – everywhere. The necessity to not show weakness, to 'man up' starts early in life and goes on to permeate adulthood at home, at work, in sport and romance. In fact, one particular shame trigger for men was sexual rejection.

turns up. Brown calls it "foreboding joy" – not being able to delight in a moment without wondering what the catch might be. The trick is to feel gratitude in that moment. Joy doesn't have to last forever. In fact, it won't. But by spotting those moments, those little things and allowing ourselves to really experience them, we enrich our lives.

Vulnerability and authenticity

Becoming vulnerable is about jettisoning who we think we should be for who we really are. Another area of study that resonates with this is the authenticity research done by Professor Stephen Joseph of Nottingham University in the UK. He is a leading voice in positive psychology and his book *Authentic: How to Be Yourself and Why It Matters* explains how we can flourish in choosing to live true to ourselves.

In his book, Professor Joseph shares his 'authenticity formula'. It comprises three things:

Knowing yourself
-
Owning yourself
-
Being yourself

As with putting Brown's findings into practice, none of these things is easy to do. However, Joseph's book shares lots of practical exercises across all three areas to help us become authentic.

The first step, that of getting to know ourselves, is about understanding the things we do to deceive ourselves. This includes behaviours like defence mechanisms, for example, denial ('Of course I'm not drinking too much') or rationalising our reactions ('I didn't really want that promotion anyway'). Other behaviours that can stand in the way of seeing ourselves clearly include acting out (throwing our toys out of the pram) and displacement (shouting at the dog when you're angry with your partner).

Although defence mechanisms can be useful at times, perhaps getting us through tough times, they can stop us from really seeing how things are. It's not always easy to do this by ourselves and sometimes we might need help in finding our way. But, by noticing how our self-fooling behaviours can get in our own way and by listening to our inner wisdom instead, we can take that second step. We can choose to take genuine responsibility for the way we act.

Finally, it's about putting it all into practice, moment by moment. We begin to use what we've found out in the first two steps to re-build a more genuine self-image and live differently – say, putting in the boundaries we need, becoming more assertive with others and accepting ourselves for who we actually are. In this way, as with Brown's vulnerability, we can drop the constant ranking and comparing with others. Whilst Brown talks of "shame resilience," Joseph goes a step further in talking about "shame resistance," but both becoming vulnerable and living authentically share that same willingness to take a stand against shame doing its thing and holding us back from living better. Brown's wholehearted people believe that they are enough even though they know they mess up; Joseph's authentic people "recognise (instead) that different people have different strengths, talents and abilities and are all equal as human beings."

> "IF WE ARE PREPARED TO DROP OUR MASKS AND SHARE THE REAL US, OUR LIVES CAN BE MUCH RICHER"

Vulnerability in the wider world

It's true that the world of late hasn't been any easier to live in. Wars, the pandemic, political wrangling, recessions – they all undermine our sense of feeling secure in our lives. And as Brown points out in her book, "rather than coming together to heal (which requires vulnerability), we're angry and scared and at one another's throats." She discovered this dynamic in play at work, in schools, at home, in politics and in the community at large, with the three factors of shame, comparison and disengagement at their heart. It's there in the workplace when we don't share the good idea we have for fear of it being dismissed. It's there in the classroom where the student doesn't feel able to challenge the teacher because they want to keep getting good grades. And it's in the home where parents want to do their best for their children but are still battling with their own sense of worth and inadvertently send messages to their kids about what makes them more or less loveable. If we look, we'll see shame, comparison and disengagement at work amongst our family, friends and colleagues, in our media reporting and communities, from the people we meet each day to those in the highest reaches of power.

However, it doesn't have to be this way. Shame in organisations can be tackled head-on if we are honest enough to seek it out and expose it and talk to one another. Brown sees feedback as essential and that it 'fosters growth and engagement'. Again, most of us might cringe about opening up in such a way, particularly in a professional setting, and Brown admits that people need training in how to give and receive it. Feeling discomfort is natural. But, instead of shying away from it, we can learn to normalise it as a part of the process. And that way, change is possible. The big challenge for

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

GUILT
Guilt is about doing something bad. For example, someone who steals something can learn that they did something wrong and can change their behaviour in future.

SHAME
Shame is about being something bad. Here, someone who steals something comes to believe that they are a thief and so has far less incentive to behave differently next time. For Brown, "Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we can change and do better."

VULNERABLE
According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary the word 'vulnerable' comes from the Latin vulnus ('wound') and means being able to be physically wounded or having the power to wound others. More recently, its meaning has widened to include defencelessness against all forms of attack – physical, emotional and psychological.

AUTHENTIC
Authentic means genuine. In terms of human psychology, being authentic is about choosing to be honest with ourselves and living according to who we really are.

HUMILIATION
Humiliation is being made to feel 'less than' by others. It can make us uncomfortable, can hurt us and is often embarrassing. However, psychologist Donald Klein believes that humiliation is less damaging than shame and maintains that we can choose not to internalise it and that instead, by seeing the problem as lying with the humiliator, we can remain robust.

leaders of all communities as Brown says, is "to teach the people around us how to accept discomfort as a part of growth."

Again in the wider world, Professor Joseph points out that whilst there is no one style of leadership to fit all, what works well against a toxic workplace is an authentic leader who can see different sides of a problem, several perspectives and understand information in a balanced way. They can then express themselves without seeming manipulative. It's something we can all be a part of. We can all learn to actively listen to "people inquiring about what is happening in their lives and speaking truthfully about our own experiences while staying in the present moment," which accords with Brown's hope for the shame-resilient feedback that can bring about change for the better.

At home, being aware of shame can help us not to use it in moulding our children's behaviour. However, they're still going to encounter it when they walk out the front door: Not being picked for the team or invited to the party, or being belittled or teased. However, Brown maintains that as long as children know they can talk to their carers about what happened, then shame resilience can be nurtured and children can develop a sense of their own worth. A feeling of belonging to the family is central here – that in the family they can be who they are and they are loved for it. Of course, there will be behaviours that need changing, but the children know that they are wholly accepted. They are loved and belong unconditionally.

For Joseph, unconditional love is the balancing act between supporting children in developing their own agency and letting them know that they are valued just the way they are. Of course, children will still pick up ideas about what make them more attractive to others but parents can help children build a sense of true worth in the way that they praise them. For example, Joseph explains, telling a child that they are pretty or smart – qualities that the child has no control over – is less helpful than praising them for what they do have control over, for example, their effort or commitment. "Authentic parents," he says, "offer their children the freedom to be themselves and to remain loved for being themselves." Of course, parenting authentically depends on how authentic one is as a person and, just as in Brown's work, actions speak louder than words. As she shares, you can't tell your child that stealing is wrong and then joke with them about how the cashier forgot to ring one of your cans of beans through.

The courage to be vulnerable

The research shows us that if we are prepared to drop our masks and share the real us, our lives can be much richer. So can those of our children, our communities and workplaces. Our world can change for the better. Of course, neither becoming vulnerable nor taking the steps needed to live authentically are easy. Both take courage. We must dare to show up. And that's scary. But not, as Brown concludes in her talk ('The Call to Courage') as scary as "getting to the end of our lives and having to ask ourselves, 'What if I would've shown up?'" Perhaps it's time for us to find out.

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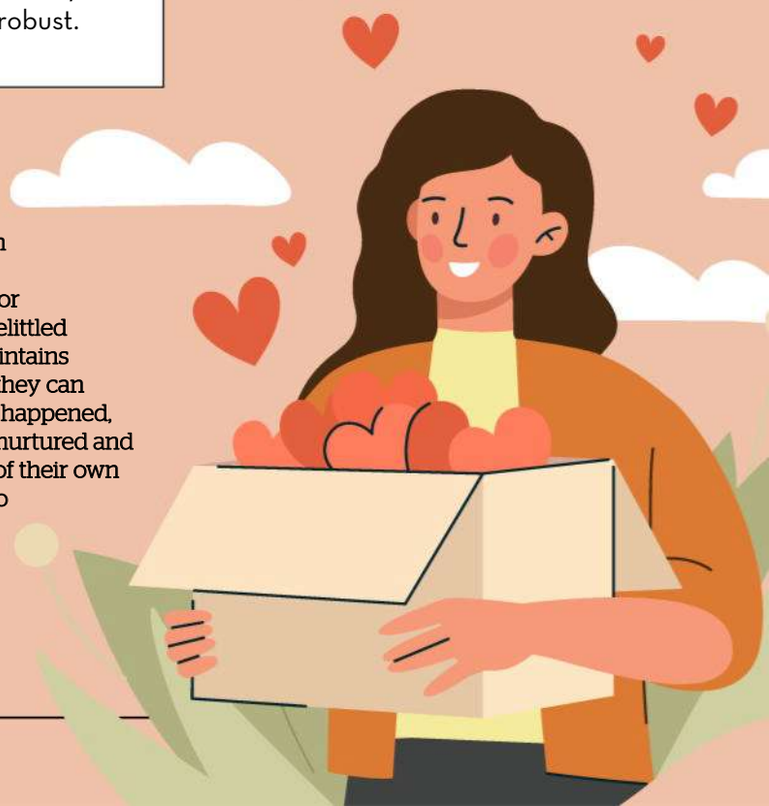

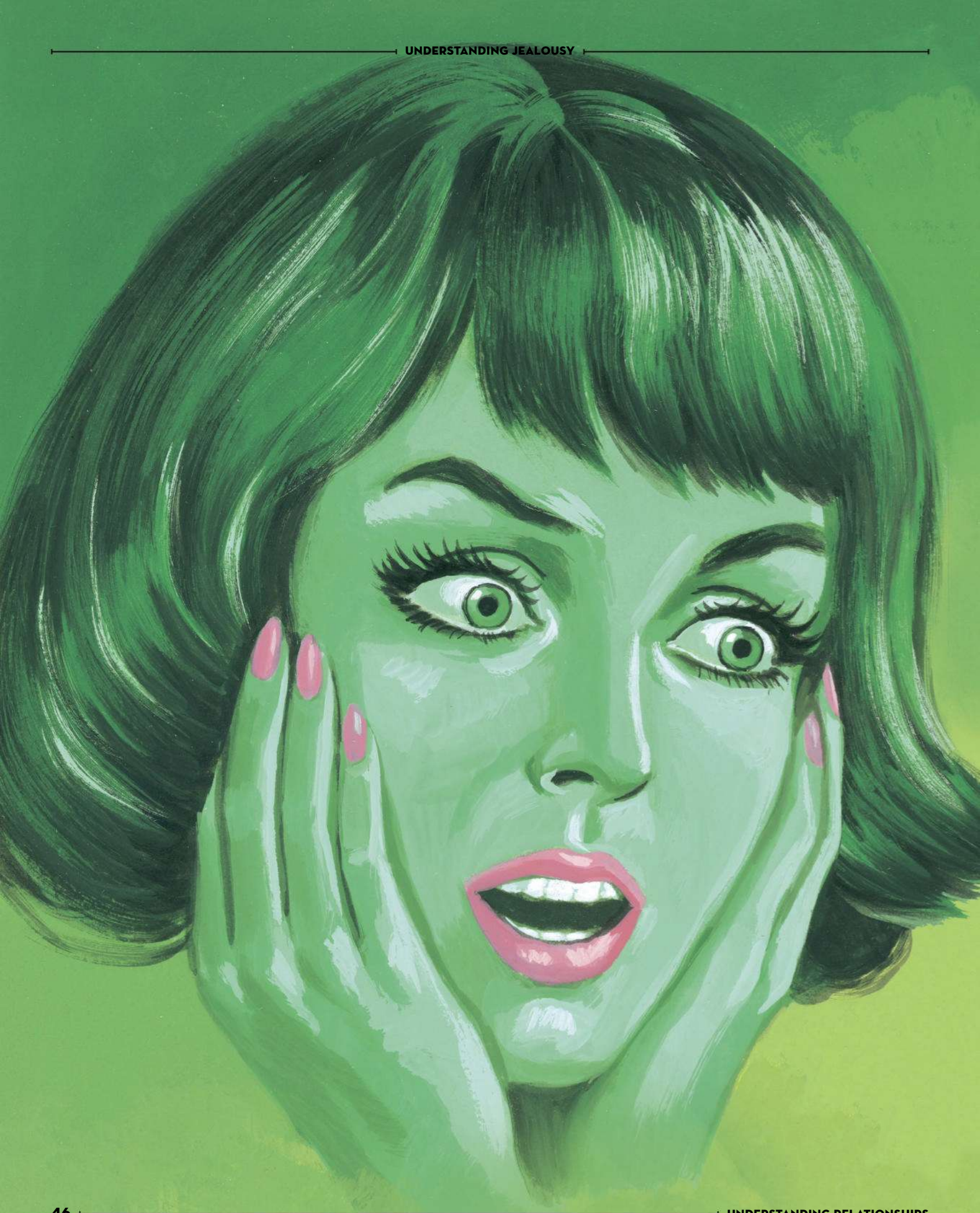

UNDERSTANDING Jealousy

The green-eyed monster is an unruly beast. Here's how to recognise it, tame it and sometimes use it to your advantage

WORDS KATHERINE BEBO

You're scrolling through social media and discover that Sally has a new car, Tawfique has been promoted, and Robyn is #livingherbestlife whilst doing a handstand in a bikini. Oh, and Ming-Lee has received a huge bunch of flowers from her husband, just because. How do you feel? Thrilled for your friends' happiness, good fortune and killer abs? Or – be honest – a teensy bit jealous?

Jealousy often comes from a place of fear. Fear of losing your partner to someone else, fear of being outshone by a higher-achieving colleague, fear of your siblings getting more attention from your parents than you...

"Jealousy is a primal emotion," says counsellor and psychotherapist James Hartley. Evolution developed it as part of a spectrum of emotions included in 'The Threat System', which was designed to keep us safe and ensure our survival. So say, for example, you see your partner flirting with someone else and your natural reaction is to feel jealous – this jealousy would alert you to a threat in your relationship and, in turn, a threat to your happiness, or 'survival'.

Executive coach and personal development consultant Emma Kangis expands, "Jealousy can trigger the brain to release stress hormones that cause a 'fight or flight' response." This stress response can lead to a spike in blood pressure and a raised heart rate. So you may go in to fight the situation, confronting your partner or the object of their wandering eye; or you might handle it in a different way, perhaps becoming quiet and sulky, or even choosing to ignore what's going on and trying to bury how you're feeling.

But sweeping emotions under the carpet is never a good plan. Repressed jealousy is bound to surface at some point and, most likely, will have become more intense while it was stewing. "It's difficult to manage jealousy," says Emma, "because it's considered to be an unacceptable emotion to feel." Jealousy is regarded as an 'ugly' trait, reserved for the bitter bunny boilers of this world. But jealousy is, in fact, very common. A study by the University of California, San Diego, found that around 80% of the people surveyed admitted to feeling envious in the past year. Interestingly, it was those under the age of 30 who felt the most jealous. "Jealousy is a natural emotional state," confirms Emma, "and we all experience it at some point in our lives." Indeed, jealousy can creep in to every relationship we have – be it amongst partners, friends, family members, colleagues and even strangers.

All the feels

"Jealousy is synonymous with anxiety," states James. While some level of anxiety in life is helpful, as it motivates us – rather than »

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> "JEALOUSY IS A NATURAL EMOTIONAL STATE, AND WE ALL EXPERIENCE IT AT SOME POINT"

> JEALOUSY CAN SOMETIMES PRODUCE A POSITIVE OUTCOME

leaving us indifferent and neglectful to our needs – too much can become unhelpful, dangerous even. Those who experience a high level of jealousy often suffer from a high degree of insecurity and feel that to 'be okay' depends on factors outside of themselves. For example, 'I'm okay if... my partner promises to never leave me', or 'I'm okay if... I have a bigger house than so-and-so'. This mindset means that a person's self-worth and sense of safety in the world hinges on others, and that they ultimately have no control over their own happiness. "Consequently, jealous people can become coercive, manipulative and controlling," says James, "as they seek to control the external factors that are influencing their internal sense of wellbeing."

Jealousy can also stir up a mix of other emotions. We may feel anger if someone at work is promoted over us; paranoia if our partner is spending a lot of time with someone else; resentment if our siblings get more attention from our parents; sadness if we think we're being hard done by and aren't happy with our 'lot'. We may also feel guilty for being jealous – after all, aren't we supposed to be happy for others? Left unchecked, jealousy can have a detrimental impact on mental health, leaving us stressed, troubled and unhappy. "Comparing yourself with others, and wanting what others have, can erode your peace of mind," warns psychotherapist Karen Dempsey.

But it's not just our mental health that takes a beating when our eyes are tinged green. Any or all of the feelings that jealousy brings can culminate in physical symptoms, such as racing thoughts, nausea, panic, insomnia and even depression. Research backs up the fact that being jealous actually causes the body discomfort; one study found that jealousy activates a part of the brain that's involved in processing physical pain.

Wake-up call

Humans are inherently competitive. Research has found that a group of strangers put in a room together will almost immediately start to assess each other – who's more attractive, who's more successful, who's stronger, and so on. But why do some people feel *more* competitive – or jealous – than others? Root causes of jealousy can include high neuroticism, low self-esteem and fear of abandonment. "The extent to which we feel jealousy stems from our personal experiences throughout life," says Emma. If, in childhood, someone's needs, desires or wishes weren't met, they may have become accustomed to regularly wanting what others have.

James agrees that childhood experiences play a part in the level of jealousy a person feels. "A high degree of jealousy as an adult can occur if a parent or caregiver fails to provide adequate unconditional love and safety to a child," he says. Growing up in such an environment, a person seeks love and security elsewhere, and can become dependent on external sources of self-worth, such as wealth, relationships and career.

Although jealousy can be destructive and cause insecurity, suspicion, bitterness, fear and resentment, it can sometimes produce a positive outcome. A feeling of jealousy can be the wake-up call we need in order to nurture our relationships and not take them for granted. "We can all be complacent with family, friendships and partners," says Emma. "A situation may create feelings of jealousy and remind us not to be quite so complacent." So jealousy is sometimes a necessary emotion in order to preserve bonds and encourage someone to 'up their game' in a certain relationship. In the workplace, jealousy can be a motivator and can encourage a sense of healthy competition in order to reach your potential. "A spirit of competition may keep you on your toes and help you work on reaching your goals," confirms Karen.

Extreme jealousy, however, is nobody's friend. It's a destructive, toxic emotion and can lead to a great deal of upset – both for the person feeling jealous and for the person who is on the receiving end. To deal with feelings of jealousy, self-awareness is key. "If you note you're feeling jealous, check in with yourself to see where your fears or insecurities are coming from," advises Karen. Recognising what triggers jealousy for you means you can start to manage those feelings before they become damaging. "Try to focus on yourself rather than others," suggests Emma. "If you feel jealous of someone, remind yourself of your own strengths and achievements." Obsessing over what someone else has means you spend less time focusing on how you can improve your own situation to become more fulfilled.

No comparison

Certain techniques can help to rein in your jealousy. First, you could try mindfulness to reduce negative thought patterns. When you feel jealous, take a few minutes to sit quietly and focus on your breathing – breathe in for three seconds, hold for four and breathe out for five – to enable yourself to feel more calm and centred. Going for a walk or doing another form of exercise may also be beneficial. "Journalling about frustrations and the root of your jealousy may help," recommends Emma. "It frees the mind." She also suggests talking to someone, be that a friend, colleague, coach or therapist to release negative emotions and give the mind the opportunity to create space for other, more positive thoughts. "It

JEALOUSY VS ENVY

Although the terms 'jealousy' and 'envy' are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between the two. "Feeling jealous towards someone usually happens when we feel possessive over something or someone and we fear we might be replaced," explains Emma. "We feel envy when someone has something that we don't have." It's possible to feel jealousy and envy at the same time. Furthermore, there are two types of envy: malicious and benign. Malicious envy comes from a place of bitterness and an 'I want what they have' attitude, whereas benign envy is more aspirational, along the lines of, 'If they can do it, perhaps I can too'. A study at Tilburg University in the Netherlands showed benign envy to be a powerful motivational force, encouraging students to dedicate more time to their school work.

can be refreshing and helpful to share how we are feeling," she says. The person we are talking to may even reassure us that our feelings of jealousy are unfounded.

Jealousy can become a habit. "The more we remind our brains of jealousy, the more repetitive it can become," warns Emma. Many people are never content with what they have and are constantly looking for something more. Social media often doesn't do us any favours in this regard – it enables access to a constant barrage of everyone's 'perfect' life. When we start comparing ourselves to other people's public personas – a veritable highlight reel of pouting selfies, self-congratulatory statuses and smug hashtags – it's easy to feel inferior. But jealousy can prevent us from living a secure, fulfilled life, so it's important to try to control the negative aspects of this emotion. "Recognising and managing jealousy can lead to a better understanding of ourselves and what drives us, and ultimately can make us healthier, happier people," concludes Emma. Crucially, we need to stop comparing ourselves to others; after all, comparison is the enemy of contentment. ■

WORKING WITH JEALOUSY

Executive coach Susy Roberts says:

"Jealousy can occur at work if someone's promoted and someone else believes they deserve it, or if they perceive that managers are favouring others. This can result in insecurity, perhaps leading to attempts of sabotage: talking behind someone's back and trying to bring them down. If you've felt this way, talk to your boss – diplomatically. Don't shout like a moody teenager; explain how you feel and give your reasons. Ask what you can do to put yourself in line for promotion next time. If you're a manager dealing with a jealous person, listen to them and discuss their aspirations, then support them to achieve them. Jealousy is rarely borne of malice and is often the result of someone feeling overworked and under-appreciated. Little acts of kindness and attempts to understand where the other person is coming from can nip it in the bud."

"EXTREME JEALOUSY IS NOBODY'S FRIEND. IT'S A DESTRUCTIVE, TOXIC EMOTION"

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WALKING IN Someone ELSE'S SHOES

What is empathy and why is it so important to our own and others' wellbeing?

WORDS JULIA WILLS

The terms sympathy and empathy are often confused. It's hardly surprising given that both are about relating to someone else's distress, but whilst sympathy is about feeling sorry for someone, empathy is about imagining yourself in their unique situation.

Author and professor Dr Brené Brown sums up this distinction in her RSA talk[1]. In this, she shares that empathy is about connecting with others, while sympathy forces disconnection. She tells us about the findings of Theresa Wiseman, a nursing scholar, who distilled the four qualities of empathy as: the ability to take the perspective of another person; of suspending judgement; of recognising the emotions experienced in the other person and communicating that recognition. Significantly, for Brown, there's no requirement for the empathiser to sort things out for the person in crisis or, worse, aim to put a brighter spin on their situation.

Psychologists Daniel Goleman and Paul Ekman identified three types of empathy: cognitive, emotional and compassionate. Cognitive empathy is logical and about understanding what is going on in someone else's mind. Emotional empathy is the ability not only to recognise someone's feelings,

but to share and feel them too. Compassionate empathy motivates us to help. So, if a friend's dog has died, cognitive empathy enables us to rationally understand that losing a beloved companion is very distressing; emotional empathy might bring us to tears too, while compassionate empathy could motivate us to invite our friend out for a coffee and a chat.

How and why do we experience empathy?

As Mary E Bates, PhD explains in her article *Empathy as a "Danger Antenna"*[2], when we see another person in pain it stimulates the anterior cingulate cortex of our brains, the same area that's active when we personally experience the pain. Empathy, as a behaviour, is hardwired. Her article then focuses on research conducted by the Netherlands Institute for Neuroscience, which suggests the presence of another reason for empathy's biological basis. In the experiments led by neuroscientist Christian Keysers, two rats were put face-to-face: one was electrically shocked ('the demonstrator') and the second witnessed this ('the observer'). The observer picked up the fear of the demonstrator. As Keysers points out, this makes sense in evolutionary terms: being able to pick up another's fear acts as an early warning system. The flow of information, however, was revealed to be two-way: the observer's reaction affected the demonstrator's response to the shock. If the observer was less frightened, the demonstrator's fear level also dropped. Keysers concluded that, "Empathy proper can then build upon this mechanism. Empathy is then a side-effect of a selfish motive to detect dangers."

Empathy helps us to connect with others, to develop relationships and to understand one another. It enables friendships and partnerships, cooperation and harmony. And it starts young. As Vanessa LoBue, PhD, aka The Baby Scientist, tells us in her article *Promoting Empathy in Our Kids (And in Ourselves)*[3], it starts in infancy. Children of 14 to 18 months old will try to help an adult who appears to be in distress and will attempt to comfort their mother if she is upset.

Why it's good for us

Empathy helps us to live peaceably together. It catalyses our desire to care for one another, to nurture, protect and find harmony with people who think differently to us. It's the essential ingredient in strong friendships, partnerships, marriage and at work. It bonds us as fellow humans. Perhaps it's most useful when the behaviour of those around us seems unusual: empathy enables us to appreciate why they feel that way. That connecting with others is something that applies in both real and fantasy worlds. After all, creating empathy is a key skill for writers who want to engage their audience. For us to root for a character, we need to understand them even when we don't particularly like them. It's the reason we cheer for the Don Drapers, the Walter Whites and the Carries of the literary and movie worlds. Sure, we might not want them as our friends, but we certainly understand why they do what they do.

Why it's not

Surprisingly, empathy has some downsides. One is that we don't all feel it to the same degree. As LoBue explains, children who naturally feel more negative emotions are vulnerable to feeling empathy more intensely and this can cause them distress. On a personal level, it can be exhausting and, in more extreme cases, lead to problems such as mood swings and the relentless need to fix everyone's problems.

And there are social snags, too. Paul Bloom, Yale psychology professor and the author of *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, explains that feeling as overwhelmed as our distressed friend may not be the most helpful response for them. Similarly, we wouldn't want our doctors, nurses and carers to feel so much empathy that they couldn't effect the best treatment for us. Putting empathy to one side, he says, can enable us to be more rational in our decision making, for example in protecting the environment. By overriding empathetic concern for those around us today we can make global changes that will benefit future generations.

How to cultivate empathy

We can boost our empathy by opening up to new experiences, such as volunteering or reading more fiction, particularly about characters who aren't like us. We can listen more actively, talk to strangers and be curious about their lives, which enables us to really imagine what it is like for them.

It seems that empathy can be a mixed blessing. Some experts point to its dangers, yet it feels counter-intuitive to look at something so naturally human and kindly in this way. Perhaps the answer lies in indulging it more mindfully, of being aware of instances where it might lead us astray and, in that way, making it an even more powerful force for good.

US AND THEM

Research by Kevin Arceneaux, professor of political science at Sciences Po Paris, reveals that we are less likely to feel empathy for people who are different to us. We asked him why he thought this was. He replied: "Empathic response is mentally taxing. For this reason, the human mind seems to put some limits on empathic response. Research has shown that we are far more likely to react with empathy toward a single person in pain than we are to thousands of people in pain. It is possible that a similar logic applies to out-group members. Humans have a tendency to draw a circle of empathy around their in-group because it helps them avoid being overloaded. Why their in-group? One common explanation is that empathy developed as a way to motivate helping behaviour, which in turn makes group living possible. But it is often not possible to help everyone in need. In those instances we need a hierarchy of who gets help". Asked whether we might learn to empathise better with out-groups, he said that it was possible, but we needed to be motivated to do so. "I'm working on this question with my colleague Ryan Vander Wielen at Stony Brook University. We have conducted a study to see if compassion training – which goes beyond getting people to take the perspective of other people but to actively feel compassion toward them – helps people be more empathetic toward out-group members. We find that it can, but the effects are quite small."

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1. *Brené Brown on Empathy* – YouTube; 2 & 3. *Psychology Today*

Learning TO TRUST

Trust is a powerful emotion that builds relationships and connections, but our lived experiences feed into our ability to trust

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

Trust is a key part of good relationships and friendships, yet it doesn't come as easily to some of us as it does to others. It's hard to define what trust is. Sure, there is the dictionary definition – 'a firm belief in the reliability, truth or ability of someone or something' – but real trust is far less tangible than that. Our ability to trust in the people around us is influenced by our experiences, our past, our instincts and our personality.

Trust is something that is at the heart of our daily life in many ways. We have to put our trust in people at work, when commuting, for our medical health and so on. Every time you order a taxi, you're putting your trust in the driver to get you safely from A to B. When you hire someone to deliver a service (a tradesperson, for example, or a babysitter), you have to trust that they will do a good job. When you have a confidential business conversation with a new client, you need to trust that they won't pass knowledge on. You need to have trust in medical professionals, government bodies and employers to have your best interests at heart. Trust is a thread that runs through all our connections, from the closest relationships to people we meet only fleetingly.

When trust is broken, it can be hard to restore, and it can influence how we trust in the future.

When it comes to meeting people for the first time, we unknowingly take a lot of cues from the environment around us, as well as the behaviour and appearance of the person we're meeting. Not only that, cultural and societal influences have a large part to play in our ability to trust. Think back to your childhood: how often were you told not to speak to strangers? How many stories have you read over the years where terrible things have happened to victims at the hands of people they trusted? How many times have you heard of people falling for scam emails or phone calls because they trusted what they were told? Everything we have heard, seen and experienced in our life feeds into our ability to trust people now. If you've had your heart broken, you may find it hard to trust a new partner. If a friend spills your secrets, you won't be able to trust them in the future. If you're passed over at work for a promotion you were promised, you might not be able to trust your boss is looking out for you. If you're misdiagnosed by a medical professional, you may always distrust doctors. There are hundreds of scenarios throughout our lives that contribute to the way we trust. The deepest trust is developed over time, whether that's with our partners, our family or our oldest friends. Those people who we feel comfortable around, share our secrets and fears with, and feel safe among. But we need to be able to build trust with new people too.

Trust is complex. Without knowing it, we subconsciously apply all of these learnings and experiences to situations in which we need to trust someone. Often this manifests itself as instinct; when we meet someone new, we get a 'feeling' about whether we can trust them or not. We also need to trust our own instincts; if we've been burned once by someone we put trust into, we may then not trust ourselves to not make the same mistakes again and question our ability to read situations or people.

How much these past experiences influence future trust varies hugely from person to person, depending on our personalities. Some people can dissociate past experiences from future experiences – they understand that because one person treated them in a particular way, doesn't mean that another person will be the same. Others find it harder to let go and project past trauma into present situations. Some people are naturally more cynical about the world around them; some are incredibly open and accepting for new possibilities. Trust is more than a feeling; it's an emotion, and like any emotion it can be hard to control or question.

There is also, potentially, a chemical element to trust. The working theory is that trust can be linked to oxytocin, which we already know plays a key role in social bonding and love. One study* suggests that oxytocin plays a role in a person's willingness to accept social risks – choosing to trust someone does require taking a risk.

Whether you're someone who trusts too easily, or someone who is very distrustful, there are ways that you can manage to develop a healthy level of trust. It starts with being able to set your own boundaries and values, rather than being influenced by society, family or belief. Focus on what you believe in, what values you hold close to your heart and who you are. This will help you to live your life in a way that's true to you as a person, and these new experiences will then feed into your instincts and trust, helping you build new relationships. When you meet people, explore your feelings and gut instinct over whether you trust them – question why you feel that way and what could be feeding into those emotions. Over time, you'll learn to trust your instincts, finding a balance between being able to trust and being open to new relationships, and protecting your boundaries and wellbeing.

If your inability to trust comes from a significant past trauma, you may need professional help to move forward. Talking to someone through therapy, for example, can help you to face your experiences and give you the support you need to move forward, helping you to learn to trust again.

5 WAYS TO BUILD TRUST

If you want to develop trust in a new relationship or friendship, try these top tips.

LISTEN

When someone you're with is talking, listen to them properly and intently. Trust is a two-way connection and as they open up to you, you'll feel more confident about opening up in return.

COMMUNICATE YOUR WORRIES

If you find it hard to trust due to a specific past experience, then don't be afraid to explain this, and that you're trying to learn to trust again. Honesty breeds trust.

TAKE YOUR TIME

Don't rush into anything. Take a little time to build a new relationship and the trust that comes with it, and stick to your boundaries.

DON'T ASSUME

Set aside your doubts for a period of time; it can be easy to fall into a trap thinking that a person is going to let you down in some way that you've experienced before, but you need to give each fresh connection a chance to flourish (or not) on its own terms.

TAKE A RISK

Be bold! Put yourself into a situation where you need to put a little trust into the other person. Book an activity to do together, or arrange to go somewhere new, putting you both outside of your comfort zone a little and therefore needing to have faith in each other.

> "OUR ABILITY TO TRUST IS INFLUENCED BY OUR EXPERIENCES"

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*Kosfeld, M., Heinrichs, M., Zak, P. et al. Oxytocin increases trust in humans. Nature 435, 673–676 (2005)

WHY Conflict CAN BE GOOD FOR YOU

Do you do everything possible to avoid confrontation? It could be harming your health and your relationships

WORDS TANYA PEAREY

We've all been there. The heat is rising, tempers are flared and the mother of all arguments is about to kick off. But what do you do? Enter a slanging match that ends with nothing resolved? Or are you a peacemaker at any cost, finding yourself biting your tongue, and caving in to the louder and angrier voice? Perhaps conflict makes you panic, so you head for the hills at the first whiff of it. Don't! It's not healthy for you or the relationship – whether that's with your partner, teenage kids, in-laws or colleagues.

"Conflict is going to happen," says relationships expert Jonathan Taylor-Cummings. "But conflict itself is not a problem – it's more about how you handle it. Deal with it well and you can actually strengthen a relationship, and both come out of it stronger. Handle it badly and, very quickly, things can spiral out of control."

Letting rip might make you feel better initially, but afterwards, neither of you will feel good and your relationship may be damaged irreparably. On the flip side, avoiding confrontation can build anger and frustration, and issues don't get sorted. So learning how to deal with discord in a positive way is a valuable skill to develop. Research shows that it's not only good for building stronger connections, it also improves understanding of each other and increases intimacy.

Rules of engagement

The golden rule during disagreements is, "Be careful, not crushing," says Jonathan who, alongside wife Dr Andrea, published *The 4 Habits of All Successful Relationships* (£12.99/$16, Malcolm Down Publishing). Key to treading carefully is recognising the state of your relationship with the person you're in conflict with. "Understanding the context of a relationship is important," adds Dr Andrea, as it helps you evaluate whether what you are going to say is likely to land badly.

We also need to rid ourselves of the idea of 'winning' an argument. Instead, the focus should be on finding the best resolution – one that is workable.

"Most of us in a conflict situation do the 'selfish' thing," says Jonathan. We look for the best 'me' outcome – coming out on top or avoiding the confrontation altogether because it makes us feel uncomfortable. We need to seek the best 'us' outcome, where the relationship strengthens through well-managed conflict resolution. One of the best ways to do that with those closest to you, say the couple, is to have established ground rules so that during conflict you have a preprogrammed guide on how to behave constructively. This is particularly effective for relationships with your partner and teenagers.

"In our relationship, for example, there are a number of things we put in place," says Jonathan. "Obviously, we'd never hit each other, but we'd also never walk out of the house in anger – that communicates all sorts of messages of abandonment for us, so it was a big deal. It's OK to go to another room, but don't leave the house. Thirdly, we agreed never to threaten divorce just to hurt or bully each other."

"We did the same with the children," adds Dr Andrea, "because ground rules give boundaries – a safe space to work things out. We said it's OK to be angry, but it's not OK to be rude. So no walking off and slamming doors and being disrespectful. In relationships in general we would say: attack the issue not the person, and praise in public but correct in private."

What's the argument really about?

Conflicts often have underlying messages and contexts. Your anger about muddy footprints in the lounge, for example, usually has a deeper significance than upset at a »

"CONFLICT ITSELF IS NOT A PROBLEM – IT'S MORE ABOUT HOW YOU HANDLE IT"

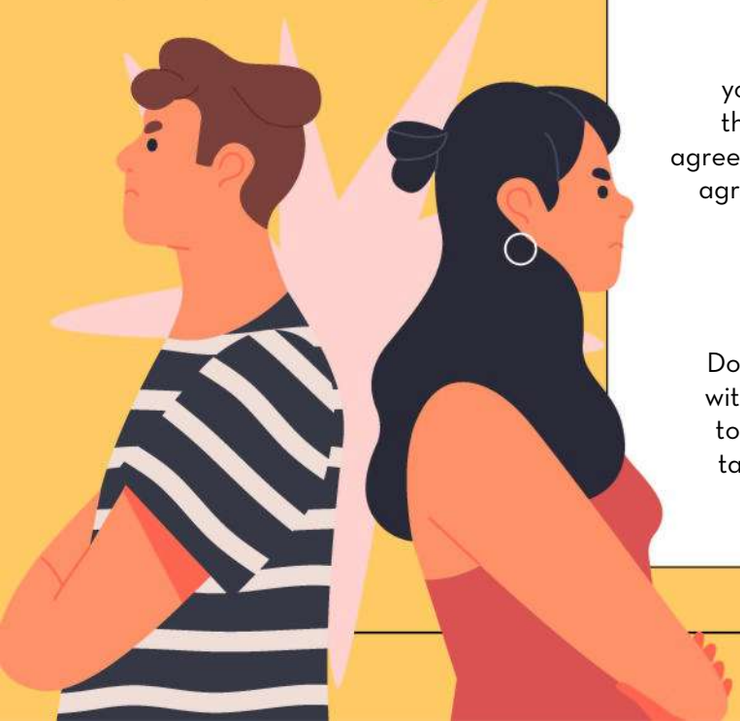
spoiled carpet. It might be more about the fact that it shows lack of respect and appreciation of the time and care you take keeping the home nice. It can be difficult to unravel hidden meanings at the time, however, so if you repeatedly have the same argument, take time after the event to look beneath the surface. Addressing core issues at a later date can stop them happening in future.

This can be a regular feature of clashes with teens whose self-awareness may not have developed sufficiently to understand exactly why they're feeling upset or frustrated. "The frontal lobes of teenagers' brains – where they do all the rational thinking – is under construction," says Dr Andrea, "so they're often left with their emotional response, which can seem extreme." It's why one minute they can behave like loving, caring individuals and the next like the most thoughtless person on the planet. "As parents, that puts the onus on us to grow up in our relational intelligence," she says, "so we can be that safe stability that anchors them during such an emotionally turbulent time." Don't feel the need to fight every battle.

Bringing to a close

Put a time limit on a conflict. If you're not making headway after 20-30 minutes, agree to take a break, advises Dr Andrea. "Come back with fresh energy – and a fresh perspective." Drawing a line after a dispute is crucial too. "After the conflict is done, the harsh words and heat of the moment passed, it's important to check in on the relationship," says Jonathan. "Ask, are you OK? Apologise if you need to. Even if you think you're 10% to blame and your partner's 90%, take responsibility for your 10%."

Ending on a positive note will help you to reconnect and strengthen your bond. Jonathan says, "People may forget what you said or did, but they never forget how you made them feel."



KEEPING YOUR COOL IN THE MOMENT

Expert tips for healthy conflict resolution – whatever the situation. Try LASER focus (Listen, Ask, Speak, Ensure, Restore) during a conflict situation, say Jonathan and Dr Andrea.

LISTEN DEEPLY

"Usually in a conflict situation we are only listening for the pause," says Dr Andrea, and waiting for the next chance to make our point. Instead, really focus on what the other person is saying – and you may have to read between the lines. "Sometimes it's the issue behind the issue," she says.

ASK FOR CLARITY

Before responding, make sure you really have understood what the other person is saying. Repeat it back to them to confirm. "A lot of times that, in itself, can immediately diffuse the conflict," says Dr Andrea, "when you realise there was a misunderstanding between what they said and what you understood them to be saying." Conflict is often inflamed by miscommunication during an argument.

SPEAK SOFTLY

This can immediately have a calming effect on the situation. If you raise your voice, the listener is likely to stop listening to what you are saying and, instead, will only focus on your tone of voice. This in itself can often be enough to trigger an attack or defend mode. "Be clear about what you want to say in return, but always speak softly," advises Dr Andrea. "We don't have to speak harshly, even when we are being direct."

ENSURE YOU AGREE ON CHANGES

Once you have both had the opportunity to talk about how you feel and what you need, agree how you are going to resolve the situation in a way in which you are both happy. If you cannot agree on this at the time, when feelings may be running very high, simply agree that you are both going to come back with some suggestions. Fix a time and place to do this if you need to.

RESTORE WARMTH

Don't just leave it there – no matter how happy both of you may be with the resolution, you still need to reconnect afterwards. A hug, a touch on the shoulder or a simple 'Are you OK?' may be all that it takes for you to do this. "It's about sending the message that you are loved, valued and respected," says Jonathan.

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THE GIFT OF Compassion

Many of us find it hard to treat ourselves with the kindness and compassion we willingly give to others, but it's essential we do it

WORDS CLAIRE CANTOR

Compassion is the willingness to help others, show kindness and caring when they are suffering, and try to help relieve their pain. 'Self'-compassion is offering that kindness to yourself.

We are our own worst enemy. Blaming and criticising ourselves, telling ourselves we should be better/do more/achieve more. If we don't match up to our standards and rules of living, the self-bullying only gets worse.

We understand that beating ourselves up is counterproductive. Yet we reserve our understanding for others. We consider self-nurturing as indulgent, and worry we may take our foot off the pedal and let ourselves go. No one can convince us that we *too* are worthy of love. No new job, another person, or attaining our 'ideal' weight is going to change how we feel about ourselves. Offering ourselves self-compassion can help to relieve us from the self-defeating messages. Follow these steps to get started.

> "WE RESERVE OUR UNDERSTANDING FOR OTHERS. WE CONSIDER SELF-NURTURING AS INDULGENT"

NOTICE AND ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR SUFFERING

Be mindful of your default patterns, habitual behaviours and thoughts. Recognising, 'Ah these are my negative thoughts again' helps break the cycle of believing them.

OFFER KINDNESS TO YOURSELF.

Let go of self-criticism, and offer yourself the sort of kindness you would give to others if they were struggling. Ask 'What do I really need right now?'

WIDEN YOUR PERSPECTIVE.

When we struggle we feel alone, resentful, inward looking. Seeing ourselves as part of this flawed, imperfect, complex human race can be comforting.

LIBERATE YOURSELF FROM EXTERNAL VALIDATION.

Let go of the craving for approval and validation – try not to align your future inner happiness with how you are perceived by others.

HAVE COURAGE AND RELINQUISH SELF-JUDGEMENT.

Self-compassion demands courage to do hard things. You may have reacted a certain way in the past; allow yourself the possibility of going down a different path.

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THE GOOD Argument GUIDE

It might not feel that way at the time, but a good row can have a positive effect – if you stick to a few basic rules

WORDS EVA GIZOWSKA

An argument that has gone too far can feel like hell. One of you makes what seems like a fairly innocuous comment: 'On the phone again?' or 'What do you mean, you forgot?' Then, before you know it, you're in a full-scale showdown. There may or may not be shouting, tears, eye rolling or passive aggressive, snippy comments. You can feel your anxiety levels and blood pressure rocket. Things are getting heated – or chillingly frosty – yet, you're no closer to reaching a truce.

"If you've got a good strong relationship with someone, whether it be a partner, sibling, friend or a work colleague, the occasional argument can be a good thing," says clinical psychologist Dr Michael Drayton. "In a healthy relationship, arguments enable people to learn from each other. Once you've both had a chance to calm down and reflect, an argument can give you a better insight into how someone thinks or feels."

"Not all arguments are constructive though," says Dr Drayton. "There are a few golden rules and if you break them, that's when things get toxic. It's fair play to criticise someone's behaviour or disagree with their opinion. But, it's not alright to attack someone on a personal level – 'No wonder you're such a loser'. Once you start going down that rabbit hole, things never end well."

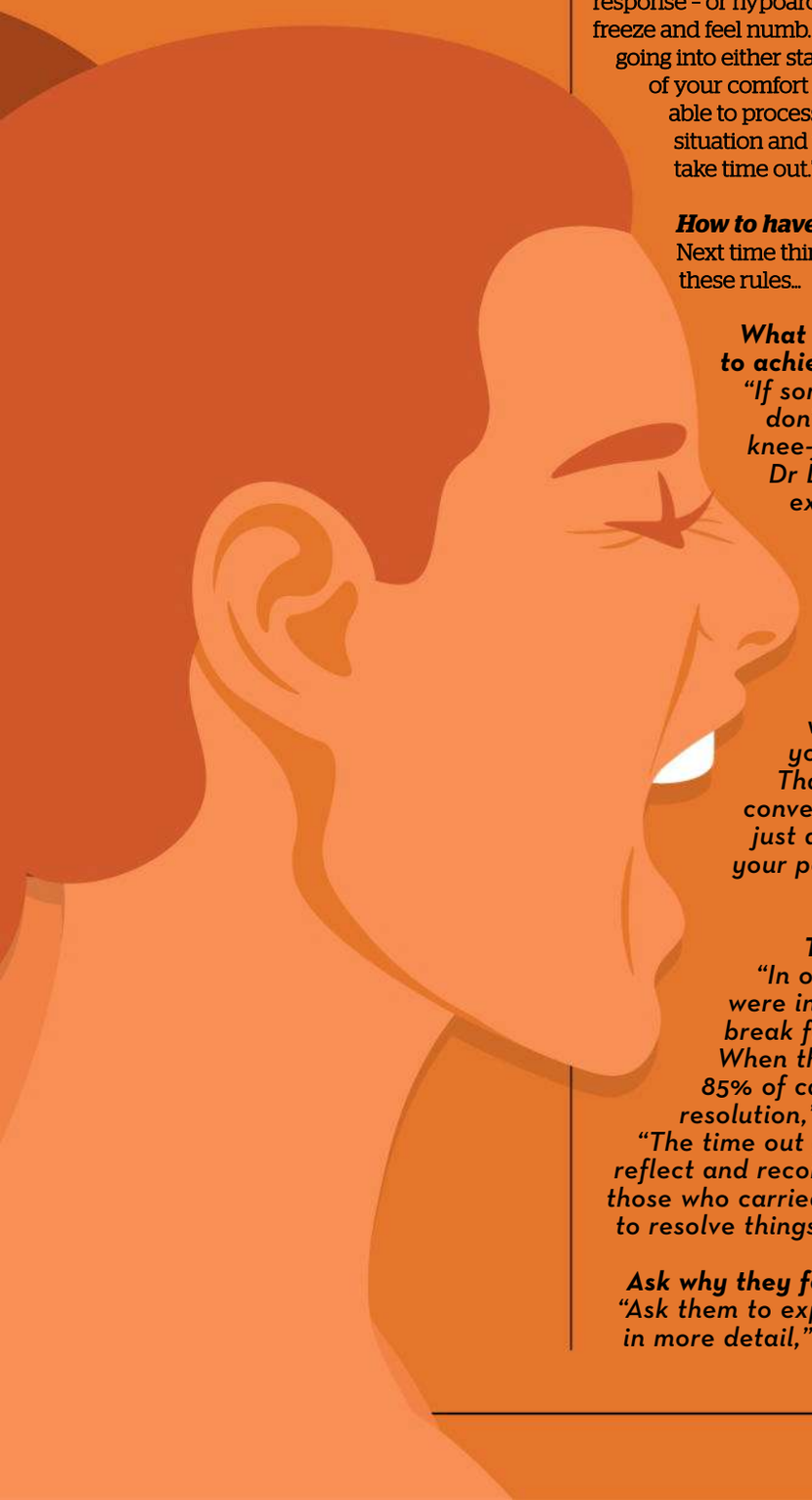
"There's some interesting research by psychologist Dr John Gottman that shows there is a magic relationship ratio of 1:5," explains Dr Drayton. "In a healthy relationship, for every negative interaction, there are also at least five positive interactions, such as showing appreciation, interest, affection and empathy. This can also be applied to friendships. We all have good and bad sides. So, even if you have the odd argument, as long as the good bits outweigh the bad, that's the mark of a solid relationship."

"We all have our own different ideas, views and experiences," says consultant clinical psychologist Dr Claudia Herbert. "So, it's

> IT'S HOW YOU EXPRESS YOUR OPINION THAT COUNTS

practically unavoidable to have arguments at times. Having different opinions is what makes us grow. A good argument can help you to see things from a different perspective. But, it's how you express your opinion that counts. There needs to be respect. It's also very important to have personal boundaries."

"It's one thing to have an argument where you strongly disagree," adds Dr Herbert. "But, if someone is being forceful, aggressive or intimidating, you've got every right to walk away. We all have a 'window of tolerance'. This is a term used by psychologists to describe the zone of arousal in which you can feel your emotions and bodily sensations, but still feel centred. But, once someone pushes you beyond your window of tolerance, perhaps by being bullying, forceful and abusive, you may either go into hyperarousal – a highly stressed fight-or-flight response – or hypoarousal, where you just freeze and feel numb. If you find yourself going into either state, you start to get out of your comfort zone. You're no longer able to process or deal with the situation and your best tactic is to take time out."



How to have a healthy argument

Next time things get fiery, remember these rules...

What do you want to achieve?

"If someone upsets you, don't respond with a knee-jerk reaction," says Dr Drayton. "Consider exactly why you feel so angry or hard done by. For example, you might say 'you're always on the phone', but what you mean is you want them to pay you more attention. That opens up a new conversation, rather than just arguing about how your partner is always on the phone."

Take time out

"In one study, people were instructed to take a break from an argument. When they came back, in 85% of cases, they found a resolution," says Dr Drayton. "The time out gave them time to reflect and reconsider. Meanwhile, those who carried on arguing failed to resolve things in 85% of cases."

Ask why they feel a certain way

"Ask them to explain their opinion in more detail," says Dr Drayton. "This is a useful negotiation tactic – it takes the emotion out of the situation and allows them to feel they are being heard. Hopefully, in turn they'll reciprocate."

Don't try to change someone

"No one has the right to dictate how other people behave or think," says Professor Macaskill. "So, if you're having an argument, it's important to remember all you can do is negotiate. It's very easy to say hurtful things, but you can't un-say them. The main thing is to try and treat people the same way you would like them to treat you."

Take responsibility for your own emotions

"You might feel angry with someone – but, it's down to you to choose your emotional state," says Professor Ann Macaskill at Sheffield Hallam University. "Remember, you're only ever one thought away from feeling differently."

Really listen

"Try and put yourself in their shoes," says Dr Drayton. "Most people, when they're in the middle of an argument, stop listening. You've got two parties where no one is hearing what the other is saying. Sometimes when you show you understand where someone is coming from, this helps to create a shift."

Be aware of your own non-verbal signals

"If you're angry with someone, even if you seem calm on the surface, you'll still be giving off non-verbal signals that you're angry or resentful," explains Dr Herbert. The other person will pick up on these signals. "It helps to stay as calm as you can. If you can't, be honest and tell them that you feel upset and need some space to think. Sometimes people trigger emotions in us that are nothing to do with the actual situation. If that's the case, just explain that this argument has brought stuff up for you, but it's actually not to do with them."

Be quick to apologise

"If you feel you've upset someone during an argument, do apologise, and do it quickly," says Professor Macaskill. "Sometimes, all someone wants is an apology and by doing so, and meaning it, it makes it easier to move on."

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HOW TO SAY Difficult THINGS

Most of us will need to have difficult conversations at certain points in our lives, whether with friends, relatives or colleagues

WORDS EDOARDO ALBERT

You've got something to tell your family. It's been building up for months, years even. The trouble is, you're pretty sure they're not going to like it. Your parents, in particular, keep reminiscing about all those anti-war marches they went on in the distant past and how they support the struggle against imperialism today. So telling them that you want to join the army is going to be difficult. Or there's that conversation you've been putting off having with your atheist friends, telling them that you've decided you believe in God and want to be baptised. Or perhaps you'd like your grown-up child to cut back on their alcohol intake or take better care of themself.

These are just some of the difficult conversations you might need to have in your lifetime. As a child, it was probably your parents who you needed to tell something to, but as you navigated through your teens, you probably had other tricky conversations. Perhaps you wanted to tell your friends that you'd been signed for a major football team or that you'd got all As in your GCSEs – you wanted to tell them news about something you'd achieved without coming across as big headed. Difficult conversations continue into adulthood, and present new challenges.

In all such cases, the key to telling people what you want to tell them, and them hearing you, is actually not the talking, it's »

the listening. The great secret at the heart of getting a message across is hearing what the other person is trying to tell you. So here is some advice for what to do when you have to have that big, important, scary conversation.

Switch off your phone

It might seem obvious, but turn your phone off before starting. Yes, it might be helpful: maybe you need to show them something on it, maybe you think it calms you down, but the notifications on phones have been designed – by skilled psychologists – to grab attention. No mindful conversation is possible if you are continually allowing yourself to be distracted through checking on phone alerts.

How you say things matters just as much as what you say

Many studies have shown that, when speaking with other people, how you speak matters far more than the words that actually come out of your mouth. In fact, in some circumstances, up to 90% of what you mean will be conveyed by body language and tone of voice. So if you have something big to say, remember: how you say it will determine the way it is received just as much as what you are actually saying. So be mindful of what your body is saying when you are speaking and, just as importantly, when you are listening. Are you closing yourself off by crossing your arms and turning away? Open yourself up and turn towards the person you are speaking to. Has the pitch of your voice risen, indicating anger and frustration? Lower it. This will help to ensure that the people you are speaking to will listen to what you are saying.

Understand what the other person is saying

You may have rehearsed what you want to say many times in your head, but for the person you are speaking to, it's all a surprise, possibly an unpleasant surprise. So if they respond by saying something hurtful or challenging, make sure that you understand correctly what they said. One way to do that is to put it into your own words and ask them if that is what they meant. Even if it truly is hurtful, don't become angry in return but try to understand where that anger is coming from. Remember, this is old news for you, but not for them.

Think before speaking

Don't just let the words tumble from your mouth. Once you've made your initial speech – maybe you planned that out – it's too easy to then get caught up in the thrust and counterthrust of argument and disagreement. Remember, you can't slow down the other person, but taking time to speak accurately and mindfully yourself will have the effect of slowing down the overall conversation, so that all parties will be able to reflect and think before saying anything that they will later regret.

Don't react, respond

In these sorts of big, life-changing conversations, where the other parties often don't react in the way that you would hope, it's natural to leap to conclusions about what they are saying and react to that rather than to what they are actually saying. Don't do this. If someone says something that really hurts, stop. Take a deep breath. Look at them, to understand if it was really meant to hurt you or something just said in the heat of the moment. Breathe again. Then respond, from your depths, and not from the surface parts of your ego that would just lash back in self defence.

> "HOW YOU SPEAK MATTERS MORE THAN THE WORDS THAT COME OUT"

Concentrate on listening, not planning on what you are going to say next

You have a point to make. So while the other person is speaking, what you are really doing is rehearsing in your mind your next, completely crushing, reply. But this is not a conversation. This is a series of monologues, marked by incomprehension and the failure to listen. A mindful conversation is one where you try to truly listen to and understand what the other person is saying. And by listening, mindfully, the chances are that you will find that the person you are speaking to wants what is good for you as well. Then that big conversation really will be the start of something big.

Use your ears

A successful conversation is about listening. Here are some tips to help you listen better:

Tip one

Breathe. When things become stressful, our breathing becomes quick and shallow: it's a hard-wired fight-or-flight reaction from when our ancestors had to face predators. While useful when facing a hungry lion, it's counterproductive during an intense conversation. To stop the adrenalin kicking in, consciously slow down your breathing, breathe more deeply, hold the in-breath for a moment, and then exhale slowly. And repeat. Pause, breathe, listen. Pause, breathe, listen.

Tip two

The biggest distraction to using your ears is our natural facility to plan

ahead, to think we know what the other person is saying and, while they are still speaking, be planning our answer in our head. But that means that we have stopped listening. A key part of mindful listening is to hear what the other person is actually saying, without their words being blocked by the jumble of our own response jostling forward to the front of our minds. So wait, listen to what the other person is saying, and then answer. A conversation is not a race. No one has to get to the finish line first.

Tip three

Be mindful of your own reactions to what you are hearing and how they may block your understanding of what the other person is saying. In a difficult conversation, it's quite likely that the other person may say something that will upset you, triggering feelings and memories associated with deep layers within you. But remember, these are responses within you: they are not the result of what the other person has said. Try to become aware of these trigger responses and do not allow them to shape your reaction to someone else's words.

Tip four

Amid the emotions of a difficult conversation, it is easy to misunderstand what the other person is saying. To ensure that you have understood their meaning correctly, repeat your understanding back to them in your own words and ask them if that is a fair summary of what they meant. That way, you will ensure that the conversation remains grounded in what both people actually mean, rather than becoming about what you thought the other person meant.

Tip five

Empathetic listening and reflection will make even the most difficult of conversations easier. Although you and the person you are speaking to might differ profoundly, by attempting to understand their position, and telling them that you are trying to understand what they are saying and why they are saying it, will result in both a less acrimonious conversation but is likely to also encourage the other person to try to understand what you are saying too.

BIG BEGINNINGS

5 ways to start a difficult conversation

ONE

I need your help with something.

TWO

Would it be all right if I got your opinion on a situation I'm currently facing?

THREE

I would appreciate your input on a problem I have.

FOUR

If you've got time, I would like to go through something with you.

FIVE

I know you want the best for me. I have something that has been on my mind that I want to tell you about.

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TALKING *without* SPEAKING

Effective communication is as much to do with our bodies as it is to do with our words

WORDS EDOARDO ALBERT

Language is important to human beings. Indeed, it's so important that we risk our lives for it. We share the same basic vocal equipment as our nearest relative, the chimpanzee, but in order to produce a greater variety of sounds with more precision, our tongue had to get longer, moving down the throat, which led to the larynx being pushed further down and a longer neck. The downside of this is that what we eat and drink has to get past the larynx to get to the oesophagus, and when it misses and goes down the wrong tube, we choke, whereas with other animals, the larynx forms a valve to prevent this.

As evolution favours the survival of the fittest, why have we evolved a potentially fatal arrangement of our breathing and eating apparatus? It's because the descent of the larynx created an echo chamber that allowed for a vastly greater range of sounds to be produced – the sounds necessary for spoken language. Speaking is so important to human beings that, evolutionarily speaking, its value far outweighs the loss of people through choking to death.

Spoken and, later, written language have allowed human beings to develop cultures and transmit accumulated knowledge down the generations in a manner unique among animal species. Words have an almost inexhaustible capacity to convey information. But non-verbal language is vast in scope too: close to a million discrete non-verbal signs and signals have been recorded by researchers, 250,000 of which are facial expressions. We are capable of an extraordinary range of non-verbal communication, but most of the time we are unaware of how much information we absorb through these channels.

The evolution of body language

The evolutionary importance of body language is apparent in our eyes. Look at the eyes of a dog or a cat. In normal circumstances, the white of their eyes are »

IT'S NOT WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S HOW YOU SAY IT

Far less discussed but almost as important as body language are all the varieties of speech that make up how we say what we say. Simply changing the pitch of an expression as loaded as 'I hate you', can alter it from a declaration of loathing to a recognition of a joke well executed. According to renowned voice coach Harriet Whitbread: "There are only five things you can change to make your voice an exciting instrument of communication: pitch, exploring different vocal qualities, change of pace, shaping words, and volume. Of these, the most important to use during a speech is pitch because a change of pitch indicates to the listener a new thought on the part of the speaker. Monotone speech is very difficult for the listener to understand since it suggests, at a deep level, that the words all proceed from the same thought. New thought, new pitch." In her work with teachers, Harriet Whitbread reminds them to: "Make sure your praise is, vocally, more interesting than your telling off."

not visible for the simple reason that white is easily spotted by prey. Nor are the whites of the eye visible in apes and monkeys. However, for humans, the importance of eye contact and knowing where other members of our species are looking outweighs the evolutionary disadvantage of sometimes being detected by prey or predators.

Work on which specific areas of the brain recognise body language is a continuing research area in psychology. Results so far indicate that two visual areas and the amygdala are crucial in the neurology of body language. The involvement of the amygdala in understanding body language underlies how deep rooted it is within us, for the amygdala is one of the most ancient parts of the brain and a key driver of decision making, memory and emotional responses.

The deep roots of body language

If spoken words are something we risk our lives for, then why do textbooks regularly trot out the statistic that, in terms of communication, what we say – the words – counts for only 7% of the message, while tone of voice and other vocal qualities make up 38% of the communication, and a whopping 55% is down to non-verbal signs: body language? If we risk our lives for the ability to speak, why don't we use it more in our communication?

It's because our ability to use language is a relatively recent evolutionary development, originating somewhere between two million and 500,000 years ago. But that's not to say our ancestors did not communicate – they did, in the same way that your dog communicates with you today: through non-verbal language. This means that our ability to use, respond to and perceive body language is embedded far more deeply in our brains than verbal communication. The question remains, though: are these gestures innate, that is genetically programmed into us, or learned by observation or in some other fashion? To answer this question, scientists have observed babies and children born blind and deaf – who could not acquire facial expressions and gestures through watching others, compared gestures and body language across cultures, and studied the body language of apes and monkeys.

Innate or learned?

Pulling this research together indicates that some aspects of body language are natural, part of the toolkit that comes with being born a human being in the same way that babies know how to suck from a nipple without being taught, whereas others are learned – with some falling into the in-between category that is language, for which we have a specific, genetic propensity but the exact form of the language depends on the particular culture into which we are born. It's good to know, therefore, that the smile is built into our genetic substance: children born deaf and blind start to smile in the same way that sighted and hearing children do. Scientists have also found that the key human facial expressions occur universally across cultures, which strongly suggests that they are innate too. These seven universally recognised expressions are joy, sadness, fear, anger, surprise, disgust and contempt. The most famous proof of this was the research by Paul Ekman, where he presented the people of an extremely remote tribe in Papua New Guinea with a simple story scenario and asked them to select the photo with the expression that best expressed the reaction of the story's hero. Even though the pictures were of westerners, the tribesmen correctly attributed the picture to the emotion.

At the other end of the scale, most hand gestures – from the obscene to the encouraging – are culturally determined, although the open palms gesture denoting peaceful intentions appears to be innate as well. It is these gestures that are liable to cause the worst cultural misunderstandings. According to body-language expert Allan Pease: "The 'OK' gesture usually means 'okay' in most Western cultures, but in France it also means zero, in Japan it means money, and in

> "KEY FACIAL EXPRESSIONS OCCUR UNIVERSALLY ACROSS CULTURES"

Greece it is a sexual insult. When travelling overseas, ask your host to show you the common local gestures so you avoid making cultural mistakes."

In between these two extremes there are a range of gestures about which scientists are still unsure. For instance, when a man and a woman pass each other at close quarters, the man will turn towards the woman whereas the woman will turn away from the man. We do not know whether this is innate or learned behaviour. Another interesting gender difference is how we put on coats and jackets: right arm first for men, left arm first for women. Whether this is innate or learned also remains uncertain.

What is clear, however, is that 'women's intuition' has its origin in the far greater ability women have to read body language than men. For instance, when scientists showed a silent film of a man and woman talking to subjects, the women taking part in the experiment were far better at telling what was happening between the two people than the men. This reflects a profound difference in neural organisation. MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) scans have shown that women's brains have more areas involved with decoding behaviour than men. While there is an innate difference between the genders in their ability to read non-verbal cues, men who work in careers that depend on communication, such as actors, do score well in non-verbal understanding. Within the wider group of women, those who have raised children also score more highly, having developed their ability to read non-verbal cues from the necessity of learning what their baby wanted.

Body-language basics

Magazines are full of articles that claim to teach the reader how to read body language: the nose rub that means a lie, dilated pupils that translates to her being really interested in you, and so on. The truth is, if it was that easy, every liar would be unmasked and there would never be any unwelcome sexual attention. But body language cannot be read, reliably, in isolation. Allan Pease puts it best: "Body language is a real language which is made of words, phrases and punctuation. The golden rule is to always read body language in clusters of at least three; like words in a sentence." So if that salesperson tells you it's the best deal they've ever made and, during the pitch, briefly covers their mouth, touches their nose and scratches their neck, then they are probably trying to sell you a lemon. Similarly, if the woman whom a man is talking to flicks back her hair, exposes the underside of her wrists and moves her handbag closer, then she probably would not be averse to being asked out on a date.

Online body language

With the shift to online communication, whole new avenues of miscommunication have opened up. Everybody can think of examples of email conversations that have become acrimonious in a way that would never have happened if the participants had been in a face-to-face conversation. Allan Pease offers some useful advice for navigating these new minefields: "Skype-type calls allow you to stare at a person and study their expression and behaviour, which is something you can't do in a real-life situation. People are more critical of you on a Skype call than in real life and are more likely to detect small movements and gestures of the face. Young people who exclusively use messaging and text should always use emojis because they convey the meaning and the feeling of the words that are being written. Without emojis, your text is likely to be misinterpreted. For example, you make a humorous quip but the reader thinks you're being sarcastic." An interesting lesson to take away in a world of online communication.

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Achieving FORGIVENESS

Closing doors on our painful pasts can open those to the future

WORDS AILSA HARVEY

Forgiving someone isn't an acceptance of the person who has wronged you, and doesn't have to mean that you're now okay with whatever has happened. To forgive someone means you're simply crossing the line between being stuck focused on the past and accepting the present. You no longer want revenge, and the negative feelings that you accumulated in the aftermath are decreasing.

Forgiveness is accepting the fact that it did happen, rather than torturing your brain with thoughts of the alternatives. When you are ready to move on and live in the moment, you are ready to forgive.

This sounds much simpler than the reality, especially when circumstances can be complex and range in severity.

We might think we are ready to move on when our minds have actually just buried the pain, ready for it to resurface later. Human beings are sensitive creatures. Our brains are complex machines, home to a range of emotions, and each one is wired slightly differently. As it rapidly fires signals in response to the events around you, people quickly learn which actions bring them happiness or flood them with dread. Designed to protect your social wellbeing, emotions can keep you away from things that have previously caused heartache, and encourage you to strive for potential rewards.

Some of the most powerful emotions come from betrayal and can have a lasting impact. The strength of the anger, upset and fear that traumatic events can have on us often leaves our minds lacking the trust it may have once held in an individual. Knowing that someone has been the cause of the pain that is affecting our daily life can leave our thoughts of them tinted with resentment. So when should we try to let go of this blame? How can we – and why should we – learn to leave the past behind us?

The truth is there's no quick fix, and beginning the act of forgiveness can't be forced. You might be the type of person who will firmly wedge a barrier between you and an old friend for that one time they let your secret slip, or you may be able to forgive a stranger who has committed a despicable crime. Could you ever forgive someone who had taken the life of someone you love? For some people, it's the only option if they are to move on. It's a process that victims of crime are regularly offered through the criminal justice system. Bringing the victim and the offender face to face can give closure to those who beforehand felt only resentment.

Readiness to forgive varies based on the mindset of the victim and the status of the original relationship. Forgiving a serious and personal crime usually takes more time, as it presents sensitive consequences. However, for smaller acts of offence, we are less likely to need to forgive a stranger. As the person isn't previously known to us, the event seems less personal and can be quickly forgotten, but it's more likely to play on the mind when it involves someone we have collected data on. Your brain knows your best friend well, but this added bit of information taints your overall view of them. To return to the feelings you previously held, you need to forgive and erase this data anomaly.

Coming from someone who was so highly regarded can make betrayals more painful. How could they have done this? Are they the person you originally thought they were? For some, the closer the person is, and the more serious their offence, the harder it can be to forgive the intent behind it. For others, though, this close bond is what helps them forgive. Rather than focusing on the betrayal, these people are more likely to dwell on the positive aspects of that person. In a romantic relationship, the victim might be inclined to forgive their long-term partner as they think they have more to lose if they don't attempt to forgive. Those who have experienced a betrayal early on in a relationship might be less willing to mend their connection.

Studies analysing the reasons behind people's reluctance to forgive show that most of the time they are avoiding coming across as weak. This is a common misconception. It might feel like you are backing down from your corner during what, in your head, is a fight for justice, but in actuality forgiving someone takes much more power. Finding the mental strength to prevent the disloyalty from taking over your thoughts also empowers your mental health. Not only have you fought the challenge they presented, but you have fought your own misplaced pride.

It's also crucial to acknowledge that even though there are professional psychologists and useful methods available to help you catalyse the process of forgiveness, two people's brains won't work identically in the same scenario. For example, those with smaller insular cortices have been found to be more likely to be forgiving. This is part of the brain that is also responsible for providing feelings of disgust, indicating that those with a tendency of being easily offended may also struggle to forgive. If you find that forgiveness doesn't seem to come naturally to you and it's starting to impact your quality of life, there are mental health professionals who can advise you of the best steps to take. It's a process that takes time, but this time can be essential for healing. When your brain completes this process, the energy it once used to cause pain can now be utilised to keep moving past, through and most importantly forward.

HOW TO FORGIVE

If you have found it challenging to forgive those who mistreated you in the past, that doesn't mean you can't train yourself to forgive. Psychologists often work with those desperate to leave their painful pasts behind them and have discovered that those who struggled beforehand were able to achieve forgiveness with some guidance. One of the main factors standing in the way of this closure was overthinking. When the trauma is revisited regularly and in a negative way, this is called rumination. Whether these are angry, sad or anxious ruminations, they can continue to jeopardise mental wellbeing for as long as they persist. By keeping the neural signals for negative emotions firing in the brain, there's not enough space between these thoughts for the forgiving process to develop. The best way to enable forgiveness is to try to empathise with the perpetrator, as hard as it may seem. Only when you try to understand the true reasons and stop demonising the 'enemy' can you begin to get clarity and attempt acceptance.

Negative emotions often can't be controlled easily, so when they do occur, acknowledging your feelings is the best step to take. Actively telling yourself 'I feel angry' will force you to remain aware of your feelings in order to learn from them. Almost like you're an outsider witnessing your thoughts, your psychological distancing will enable you to eventually regain some power over your mind.

> "HOW CAN WE AND WHY SHOULD WE LEARN TO LEAVE THE PAST BEHIND US?"

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HOW DOES Reverse Psychology WORK?

There's good news for frustrated parents trying to get their kids to eat their vegetables (or go to sleep, or clean their rooms), as science shows that using reverse psychology can, indeed, work

WORDS SARA G. MILLER

Reverse psychology is part of a phenomenon of psychology called 'reactance'. "The idea of reactance is that people are deeply motivated to protect their freedoms," says Jeff Greenberg, a professor of social psychology at the University of Arizona. "When people feel that their freedom is threatened – for example, they think someone is taking away their ability to make their own choices – they react against that threat. Thus, they may feel angry or defensive and try to reverse the threat," says Greenberg. Essentially, reverse psychology takes advantage of a person's reactance.

When you use reverse psychology on a person, you're threatening their perceptions of freedom. "Threatening this freedom makes it more appealing to choose to exercise that freedom," says

> THERE ARE PHASES IN CHILDHOOD WHERE CHILDREN ARE MORE SUSCEPTIBLE TO REVERSE PSYCHOLOGY

Greenberg. "Take, for example, a kid who won't eat his broccoli. When a parent says, 'You can't eat the broccoli', suddenly, eating it becomes more appealing to the kid," explains Greenberg. "So, although the kid never wanted the broccoli in the first place, he felt free to choose. When you take that freedom away, eating the broccoli becomes more attractive."

However, Greenberg notes that using reverse psychology doesn't always work: "It is more likely to work on people who are more prone to reactance. People who are irritable, stubborn and emotional tend to be more prone to reactance. People who are more agreeable and compliant, on the other hand, tend to be less prone," Greenberg explains. "There's also some limited evidence that men are a little more prone to reactance than women," he adds.

As for your toddler who just won't eat their broccoli, Greenberg notes that there are phases in childhood where children are more susceptible to reverse psychology. "Between the ages of two and four, for example, children can be more emotional and more rebellious, so reverse psychology might be more likely to work on them," Greenberg reveals. "But by the age of four, when kids are a bit more socialised and less likely to throw temper tantrums, they start to become less susceptible to reverse psychology."

The other classic example is adolescence. "When teens are rebelling against their parents, they might be susceptible to reverse psychology," Greenberg says. "That's a time period when parents say one thing, and teens want to do the opposite."

Greenberg points out that children, particularly younger children, are less cognitively developed, and therefore might not realise that their parents are using reverse psychology on them, whereas adults are more likely to see through it.

"Indeed, attempts to use reverse psychology on adults can backfire," Greenberg says. "They'll react against the attempt to manipulate them with reverse psychology. You can end up with 'reverse reverse psychology' in a sense. But there's no reason to say it won't work on adults; it just has to be very subtle."

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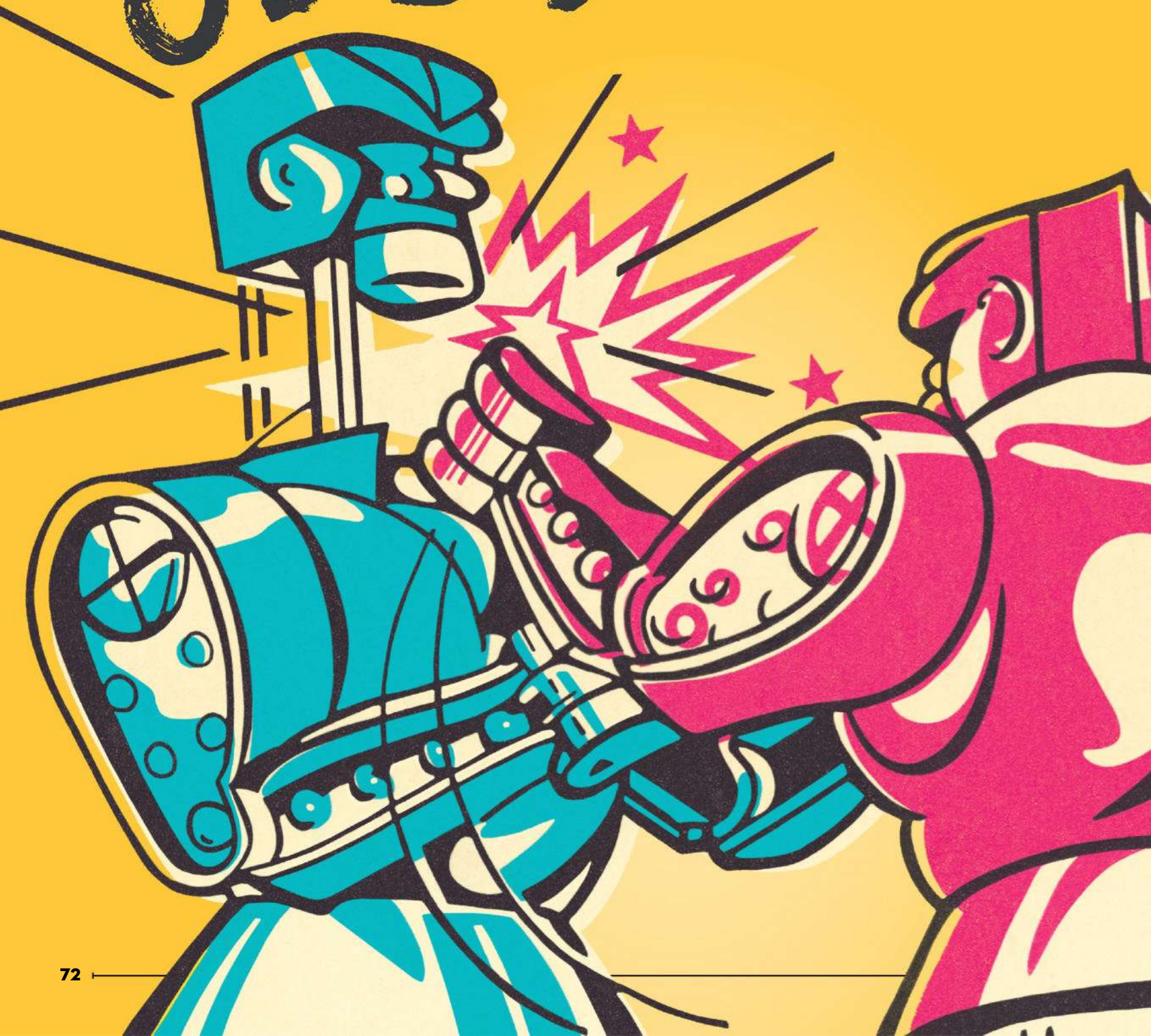
HOW TO NAVIGATE SIBLING



RIVALRY IN ADULTHOOD

You love your brothers and sisters, but why do they leave you so… 'arrrrgh'? Read on to discover how to turn your sibling rivalry into sibling revelry

WORDS KATHERINE BEBO

Drama… kindness… resentment… love… bitchiness… friendship… grudges… warmth… arguments… concern… belittling… No, this isn't describing the latest highs and lows of your favourite soap opera, but the relationships many people have with their family members – specifically siblings. "For many of us, our sibling relationships existed before we could even speak," says Hilda Burke, psychotherapist, couples counsellor and author of *The Phone Addiction Workbook*. "Because they were formed for most of us at a time when we were preverbal, logic and reason may not feature as prominently as in other relationships." For this reason, Burke – who is a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy – believes that the sibling dynamic is the most challenging to change.

That's not to say change isn't possible. If you have a tricky relationship with your siblings, you can certainly steer it in a more positive direction. But, first, it's important to look at the reasons why your sister leaves you feeling inadequate, your brother makes you want to scream, and they both leave you wanting to emigrate to the other side of the world to avoid family get-togethers at all costs.

The favourite

Sibling relationships are influenced by a number of factors, such as gender, genetics, life events, experiences away from the family, money and parental relationships. Parental favouritism is often acknowledged as a key factor in sibling rivalries. If you perceive you're not the 'favoured' one, your inner child can't help but scream: "But it's not faaaaaaaaair!" And if you are the 'favoured' one, perhaps you feel added pressure from your parents to achieve more, so resent your siblings for having an 'easy ride'. Although parents often try to treat their children equally, favouritism is actually very typical, and research has shown that parenting plays a powerful role in contributing to sibling rivalry among adults. A study carried out at Cornell University found that only 15% of those interviewed felt that they were treated equally to their siblings by their mothers.

Birth order can also play a part in sibling rivalries. As a child, perhaps you were 'displaced' by a new sibling, which can be particularly challenging if there's a big age gap between you and the new arrival. You may have liked being 'the baby' but, with a new sibling, you were suddenly in the middle, which could have been unsettling. "That can create a lot of animosity towards the new family member," says Burke, "which may never totally dissipate."

Parent trap

Adult sibling rivalries can manifest themselves in various ways. Perhaps you and your siblings have out-and-out rows? Maybe snide remarks pepper your interactions? Or it could be that your relationships have completely fallen apart and you are now estranged. However the thoughts, actions and behaviours present themselves, there's often »

a lot of blame and envy flying around. "One sibling may blame the other for the fact (or their perception) that one or both parents treat them differently," explains Burke. But rather than it being because the parents love a particular child more (a notion that most mums and dads would balk at), there are often other factors at play. Perhaps your mum lives closer to your sister than you, so is on-hand for babysitting duties, impromptu shopping trips and day-to-day quality time. Or maybe your brother and dad have a similar sense of humour, so guffaw at jokes that, to you, are high up on the cringe scale. These things are no one's fault – they just are. And the sooner you can accept them, the happier you'll be. Try not to take things personally. Your relationship with your parents is yours; theirs is theirs. There's really no point in comparing them.

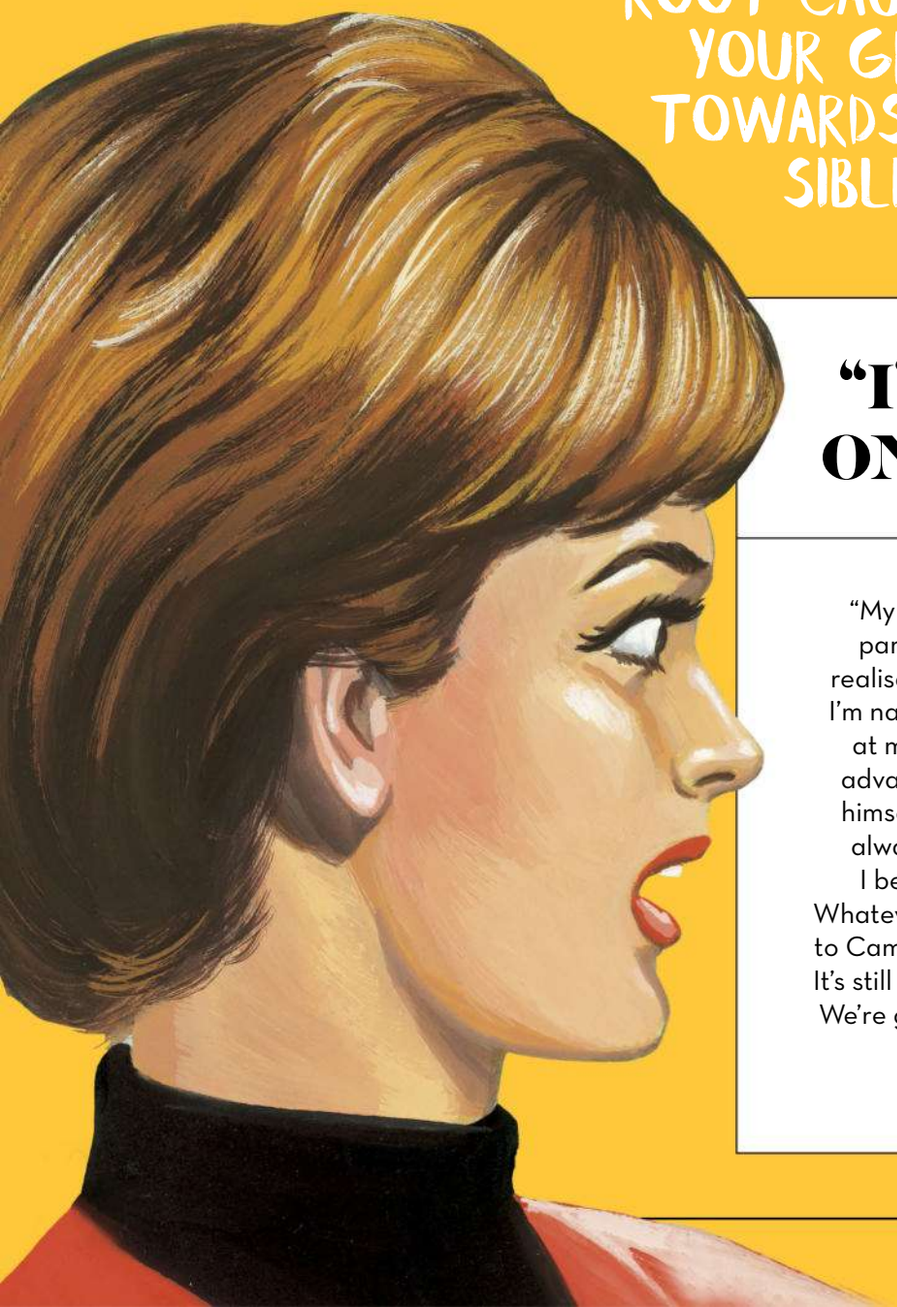
Research carried out between a group of 18 to 65 year olds found that more than a third had either hostile or indifferent relationships with their siblings. This seems such a shame. While your siblings might not be perfect (who is?), if you can foster, fix or forge a strong, positive relationship with them, you'll likely find that you are more content for it. After all, who else can you reminisce with about that time your dad fell in the lake at Center Parcs?

The green-eyed sister

So, what can be done to combat sibling rivalry? First, you need to identify the root cause of your grudge or frustration towards your sibling. It may not be one specific thing but a tangle of experiences and feelings, so sit down and allow yourself the time to unfurl your emotions. "Take responsibility for how your own resentment towards them is affecting the relationship," advises Burke. There are two sides to every story (or three, or four... depending on how many siblings you have), so try to see the situation from your siblings' point of view. What role have you played over the years? Are you entirely blameless? Chances are, probably not. If you are jealous of your sibling, it's good to admit this jealousy – if only to yourself. "So many of us feel we 'shouldn't' feel jealous," ventures Burke, "so we suppress these feelings and, [as with] any suppressed feelings, they will likely surface in other ways, maybe a bitchy comment here or there."

Jealousy can stir up preverbal feelings in us, Burke explains. Ultimately, it brings us back to the time when we first wanted what someone else had – like our mother's attention – and couldn't fully express that. So when we're envying someone else's achievements, what we're experiencing is something very young within us. "As such, we need to go gently on ourselves," says Burke. Instead of reacting to your jealousy, judging yourself for having such feelings or trying to suppress it, be curious – ask yourself why you feel this way. What is this jealousy telling you? "So rather than resenting your sibling for what they have, bring your focus to what is within your frame of influence and act on that," advises Burke. Envy is often caused by low

> "IDENTIFY THE ROOT CAUSE OF YOUR GRUDGE TOWARDS YOUR SIBLING"



"I'VE ALWAYS FELT ON THE BACK FOOT"

"My brother is two and a half years older than me. My parents had planned to have just one child, but then realised a sibling for Paul would be nice, so I came along. I'm naturally competitive, but as the younger child I'd lose at most games we played. Paul was just that bit more advanced, plus he'd never teach me all the rules to give himself an advantage – a fact he denies to this day. I've always felt on the back foot. The other areas in which I began to outstrip Paul didn't count for much to me. Whatever Paul did, I wanted to do. I even tried to follow him to Cambridge University – while he secured a place, I didn't. It's still a sore point for me. Paul is pretty oblivious to all this. We're good friends and close. This rivalry is very one-sided; he doesn't see it as a competition."

JESSICA, 35

FAMILIAR SIBLINGS

"Having lots of siblings is like having built-in best friends"
KIM KARDASHIAN

"He's rude, arrogant, intimidating and lazy. He's the angriest man you'll ever meet. He's like a man with a fork in a world of soup"
NOEL GALLAGHER ON LIAM

"My first job is big sister and I take that very seriously"
VENUS WILLIAMS

"It's that middle-brother syndrome. The older child has a very clear identity, and the baby gets a lot of attention. The middle brother is a little bit in no-man's land"
OWEN WILSON

"Be nice to your siblings, they're your best link to your past and the most likely to stay with you in the future"
BAZ LUHRMANN

self-esteem and diminished self-confidence. If you can work on these areas within yourself, you can stop things about your siblings – like your sister's ludicrously flawless skin or your brother's enormous house – from making you feel inadequate. You're not able to control what your siblings do or how they are, but you are able to control your reaction to it. If, however, it's your sibling who is jealous of you, remember that their jealousy is theirs and not yours to make right. In the words of RuPaul: "Whatever people think of me is none of my business."

Now you're talking

Don't try to compete with your siblings. In fact, don't try to compete with anyone. The most content people are those who look at what they have and are grateful; not those who look at what other people have and covet it. Rather than comparing what your siblings get from your parents and wanting it (more time, more affection, more phone calls... whatever), think about what you get from your parents and appreciate that. Or, if you feel you can talk to your parents about how you feel without causing World War III, do that. It's likely they're not aware of how much it bothers you when they regale you with endless tales about your brother's children, or how upset it makes you when they tell you how huge your sister's pay rise was. The childish urge to plead, "But what about meeeeee?" can be framed in a mature manner and you can start a dialogue with something like: "I know you love us all the same, but it bothers me when..." Don't be confrontational or rude; just tell them how you feel. Chances are, they're not actively trying to hurt your feelings but, instead, are simply being a bit oblivious. If you make them aware of this, they can change their behaviour. Or you could try to discuss things with your siblings. You may very well discover that your parents have been telling them all about your achievements and your siblings are similarly annoyed/upset/frustrated. Voila: a bonding experience!

Support act

If talking to your family isn't an option and would only cause a greater rift in your relationships, try to accept the situation as best you can. You may not get as much support or approval from your parents or siblings as you would like – but that's okay. This support and approval can be gained from elsewhere: your partner, other family members, friends, or your own children. With your own children, try to raise them so that they won't have negative issues with their siblings in adulthood. While it's impossible to treat each child exactly the same – they all have different needs, wants, talents and personalities – it's important that the whole family celebrates each child's abilities and uniqueness. Don't compare your children or define what 'success' means to you. Success is different for everyone – whether you're a child or an adult. The crucial thing that a child needs to know is that their parents 'have their back' and are proud of them and their achievements – whatever they may be.

Banter or bitchiness?

While sibling rivalry among children can often result in some harmless bickering or competitive dives for the last biscuit, as adults, sibling rivalry can start to take on a much more toxic, unpleasant edge. It can niggle, fester and ultimately make each family gathering incredibly awkward and fun-free. No one wants that. Although it's not always easy to rise above the barbed comments made at you, or fake-smile your way through your sister's 'hilarious' tale of when you accidentally spilled red wine on her wedding dress, don't retaliate with your own passive-aggressive comments. And if your brother constantly tries to bait you by calling you 'Muppet' (the 'cute' nickname he gave you when you were kids), just don't engage. Simply carry on as if he has called you by your actual name. He may want a reaction, so don't give him the satisfaction of giving him one. You can always scream into a pillow later! Of course, if it's just good-natured banter, laugh along and enjoy the time you're spending together.

Sibling relationships are very often the longest ones that we have in our lives, so trying to nurture them – or, at the very least, not get riled by them – can be a key part to our happiness. ■

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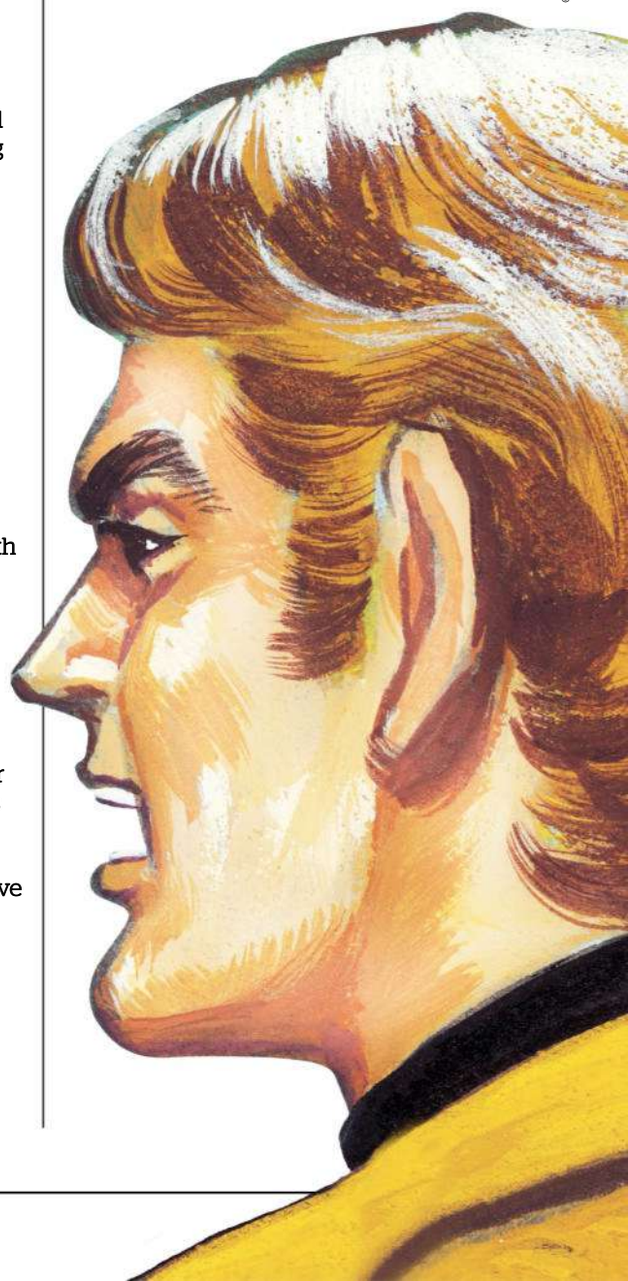

THE POWER OF Friendship

Strong personal connections in our lives can provide much more than simply companionship; friendship can shape who we are and enhance our overall wellbeing

WORDS JULIE BASSETT & LAURIE NEWMAN

"Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything."

Those are the wise words of Muhammad Ali, who understood both the importance of friendship in our lives, as well as the difficulty of putting what 'friendship' means into words. It's a mutual affection shared between two people who care for and respect one another. Your closest friends are those you can rely on in times of need, who you can laugh with, whose company you enjoy and who you communicate with on a regular basis.

Our concept of friendship changes over time. As small children, it's not uncommon to make friends with strangers in the park after just minutes of sharing the slide. Best friends can change at school with dizzying regularity. In the social peak of our teenage years and early twenties, friendships can be extensive, part of a larger network of acquaintances and connections to have fun with. And then, as we get older, it shifts again. Our friendships are refined as we navigate through our working lives, marriages, children and reduced social time. If we're really lucky, there might even be friends that make it through all these stages of life, their stories interwoven tightly with our own.

How we make friends

All of these different friendships that we forge throughout our lives play a purpose, and ultimately help to shape the person we become. But they will all have certain elements in common. We usually form friendships based on two key factors: our environment and our individual preferences.

We tend to make friends by being in the same place, both literally and figuratively. Our first friends tend to be those people that we are at nursery or preschool with, or the children of our parents' friends. Throughout school, most of our friends are also our classmates, and later college friends, room mates and work colleagues. We might meet people through clubs and hobbies we take part in. We are drawn to people who share the same interests and who have similar life experiences to ourselves, which is why most of our friends are in the same environment as us and broadly the same age. We also gravitate towards friends who share our ideologies and beliefs.

In addition, we select some friends based on our own individual preferences. This can overlap with our environmental situations, especially if we're actively pursuing an interest and hoping to meet others in the area who share the same interest. But thanks to the internet, we can also 'meet' people who share these same interests online, and over time they can become true friends.

Types of friendship groups

Many studies have investigated the different models of friendship that we may experience. One such study, by Dartmouth sociology professor Janice McCabe, found that there were three distinct models of friendship types. While her research related to college students, it's thought to likely be representative of the wider population.

First there is the 'Tight-knitter', who is someone with a very dense group of friends, »

who all know each other and are all closely connected. It's thought that this type of group is excellent for social support, but can be quite fragile, with disputes between members of the group affecting everyone and changing the dynamics.

Second is the 'Compartmentaliser', who has several clusters of different friendship groups. Most of us probably identify with this category, having groups of friends we've known since school, work friends and friends from our clubs or hobbies. This can be a useful setup, as we turn to the different clusters to meet different needs.

Last is the 'Sampler', who tends to have one-on-one friendships with a number of individuals, rather than groups of people. This can make a Sampler feel somewhat socially isolated and lacking a sense of belonging. That said, Samplers are often quite independent, not reliant on a group for their self-worth or personal success.

Whether you prefer group interactions and events, or one-to-one chats over coffee, when it comes to your personal style of friendships, the group that you most identify with can tell you a lot about yourself. The type of friendship style we're drawn to is linked to our own personality and behaviour, and identifying the types of friendships that we have can reveal a lot.

Someone who is quite introverted is less likely to have big groups of friends, preferring instead to have meaningful one-on-one connections. These can be less draining and more manageable for those who like the company of others in calmer environments and who feel lost in big groups – even those made up of friends. For someone who is more extroverted, having the chance to meet up with lots of friends at one time is exciting and pleasurable, energising and enjoyable. It might be that you like a bit of both – large social engagements and smaller meet ups with friends individually. Being true to ourselves means that we can get the most out of our friendships.

How many friends can we handle?

There may be limits to how many friends we can sustain. According to British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, we're hardwired to only be able to process a social network of a specific size. He set the number of people we can meaningfully have a connection with at 150. Through extensive studies of both contemporary and historical data, Dunbar found that 150 was consistently the maximum number a social group would reach before it either collapsed or split off into different factions.

> "GOOD FRIENDSHIPS MIGHT EVEN HELP YOU TO LIVE LONGER"

DIGITAL RELATIONSHIPS: A NEW MODEL OF FRIENDSHIP?

If Dunbar is right and we can only handle 150 personal connections at any one time, then where does social media fit in? We might have hundreds or even thousands of connections on these networks. It's thought that the brain can differentiate between the online chats we have with acquaintances and our face-to-face social interactions, but it still requires some of our cognitive power. This means that we could be expending some of our 'friendship energy' on these online connections, rather than nurturing our physical friendships. Being online also takes up valuable time, leaving us with fewer opportunities to invest in our real-life relationships. This could, over time, erode the strength of our face-to-face friendships. While social media certainly has its place to help us feel connected, ensure that it isn't taking away from your real-world relationships, as these bonds have the greatest positive effects on your wellbeing.

This might seem a lot, and you'd probably struggle to name 150 people off the top of your head, but this is the total number of personal connections that you could have in your life. This figure comprises an estimated five loved ones (such as immediate family or best friends), 15 close friends, a further 50 friends, and our more casual friendships make up the total of 150 meaningful contacts. Taking the theory further, you then might have some 500 acquaintances and 1,500 faces you can recognise. This is a range of values, and depending on personality type, you might have much lower numbers, or have more people in the early circles and far fewer as you expand outwards. This whole theory is related to the 'social brain hypothesis'. Dunbar argues that the reason primates have unusually large brain sizes in relation to body size is in order to manage these complex social systems – friendships are cognitively demanding.

The matter of who falls into which of these social circles often comes down to our frequency of communication with them. Those you make time for are likely to be your closest friends. The less you communicate with someone, the further outside your meaningful contacts they are likely to be.

"What determines these layers in real life, in the face-to-face world... is the frequency at which you see people," says Dunbar. "You're having to make a decision every day about how you invest what time you have available for social interaction, and that's limited."

Impact on health and wellbeing

Dunbar also stated in a later review that: "Friendship is the single most important factor influencing our health, wellbeing and happiness." It's no surprise then that those who are lonely are more prone to depression and other mental health conditions.

But how can something as simple as friendship have such a profound effect on us? In part, it's down to our brain chemistry. Oxytocin is a hormone secreted by the brain's pituitary gland. This molecule is often referred to by the somewhat twee nicknames 'the cuddle hormone' or 'the love hormone'. Its effects are better known in women, as oxytocin is essential in the process of childbirth and nursing, as well as helping to form the mother-child bond. The same hormone is released in men too, which is one of the reasons that skin-to-skin contact is so encouraged when their child is born. Oxytocin is an important factor in building strong relationships, and enhances bonding and loyalty to our partners. It is also very important to our social bonding and friendships as it plays a role in the development of trust.

Another hormone that plays a role in our friendships is progesterone. It's also thought when you feel emotionally close to a friend, your progesterone levels are increased, which leads to improved wellbeing, and reduced stress and anxiety. It also helps to create strong bonds between friends, which is why you and your friends feel protective of one another. According to the NHS UK, stress can cause physical symptoms (such as headaches, muscle tension and stomach problems); mental symptoms (difficulty concentrating, feeling overwhelmed, worrying); and changes in behaviour (irritability, sleep problems, changes in appetite, avoiding people). Therefore, having strong friendships in your life can help us to manage these symptoms by improving our stress control. The simple act of having someone you trust to talk to when you are worried or overwhelmed can have a big effect on your wellbeing.

One study found that strong social bonds can also help you to stay sharper as you get older. Improved cognitive function in later life has been observed in those with high-quality social relationships and friendships. Added to that, good friendships might actually help you to live longer too. It's thought that those with more social support in their lives are more likely to make it to an older age. The results of some studies even suggest that breast cancer survival rates are higher in patients who have large social networks they can depend on for support.

Friends with benefits

There are practical benefits to having friends that can also impact your overall health and »

MALE VS FEMALE FRIENDSHIP

In general, there are some differences between male and female friendships, though the overall benefits on our health and wellbeing are much the same. Male-to-male friendships are often formed more around a shared activity and tend to be less intimate. However, they are more robust, as male friends are more likely to retain friendships after a disagreement, for example. Male groups of friends can be more tribal, meeting up in larger groups rather than one on one. Female-to-female friendships however, tend to be based more on support, intimacy and connection. Women are more likely to want to spend one-on-one time with a friend, to have time to chat and communicate their thoughts and feelings. Women tend to require more communication with each other to maintain a friendship, and these relationships can be more fragile if there is a dispute. However, female connections are emotionally stronger and the bond is greater. This doesn't apply to all friendships, of course, since all our connections are unique, but these common traits have been observed in a number of studies.

wellbeing. For example, if you want to start a new exercise regime, you are far more likely to stick to it if you have a friend by your side. Or if we see a friend getting positive results from a new diet, we may feel more motivated to follow their example. We've already established that our brains are hard-wired to release hormones that promote trust and bonding in friendships, which means that we're more likely to mimic behaviours in those closest to us.

This can have a significant effect on our lifestyle. Whether the goal is to lose weight, get stronger, eat better or engage in more self-care activities, we're far more likely to succeed if we're doing it with our friends. In turn, these positive behaviours can help to keep our stress levels in check, lower blood pressure, maintain a healthy weight, sleep better and much more. All of which improves our health, wellbeing and mental state.

Of course, the flipside to this is that we are just as likely to mimic negative behaviours in our friends. If this is the case, it's worth considering whether such friendships are still healthy – or do the negative habits they bring into our lives inhibit our personal goals?

Another positive benefit of friendships is that they teach us a lot about ourselves. We often recognise certain traits in our friends that we find attractive, and from that we can start to build a picture of the kind of person that we are or that we want to be. We often select friends who represent the same values as us, which helps us to validate our thoughts, opinions and beliefs, giving us confidence and self-esteem. Our friends see us as who we truly are, as we're less likely to put up barriers or adopt a persona around those we feel most comfortable with, which is very liberating.

With such positive effects to having good friendships, it's important then to nurture those bonds with the people closest to us. It's said that losing a good friendship is akin to the grief of losing a loved one or a break-up with a romantic partner. Spend time with your friends, message them to check they are okay and show how much you value them, and you will continue to reap the rewards of the strong, positive friendships that you have forged over the years.

LETTING GO OF FRIENDS

As we embark on life's journey, we meet a lot of people along the way, but having too many friends can be exhausting

> "TOO OFTEN WE HOLD ON TO FRIENDSHIPS THAT NO LONGER SERVE US"

Over the course of your lifetime you will, without a doubt, meet a lot of people. As we navigate our way through life, some of these people we meet will end up becoming our friends. Friendships can form when we meet people at various stages of our lives, including when we go to school and university, when we start a new job, or when we participate in hobbies. But what really defines a true friend? What are the differences between acquaintances and life-long companions? And why should you hold on to some and not others?

The three types of friendships

According to Aristotle we have three types of friendships: friendships of utility, friendships of pleasure and friendships of virtue. Friendships of utility are relationships that have a mutual benefit to both parties and they are the more functional out of the three. For example, these could be a neighbour

GET TO KNOW YOURSELF

The one person who you need to get to know the most is yourself. Spending some quality time in your own company is one of the best ways that you can truly understand what makes you happy and what makes your soul sing. When we have too many friends, we frequently neglect our own problems as we become overwhelmed with everyone else's. We put our own problems and worries on the backburner – but this is wrong and this is when things can get a bit too much. Take a moment to organise and reflect on your own journey, and stop worrying about everyone else. Why not take a walk to your local park or spend an hour doing something you love solitary, such as baking or making music.

that feeds your dog or a customer at work. Friendships of pleasure form when someone shares the same interests as you. Finally, friendships of virtue are based on mutual respect and compassion, and usually form over a long period of time. These friendships are based on the idea that you share similar values and aspirations, and they can develop from as early as school years. But how are we meant to lead a balanced lifestyle with so many friendship circles? And is it possible to have too many friends?

Too often we hold on to friendships that no longer serve us, which is why it is important to take a step back every now and again to re-evaluate and ask yourself whether that friendship is of benefit to you. You have to ask yourself some key questions: Is this friendship making me happy? Is this person worthy of my precious time?

Time to let go

Maybe you can identify a relationship that is not making you happy and you frequently leave their company feeling sad. Perhaps you have a toxic friendship that leads to arguments and constant negativity. We hold on to certain friends for a number of reasons, but a common one is because of time. If we have invested significant time into a relationship, we stick with it. But whether you've been friends for one month or ten years, if that relationship isn't adding anything to your life, why waste any more time trying to fix it? Maybe you make an effort with someone and this isn't reciprocated – these one-sided friendships can leave you feeling exhausted. Like unnecessary objects in your home, it is possible and even recommended to cull your friends.

Less is more

Focusing on the people that matter the most is a step in the right direction. We need to free ourselves of the stress that is caused by trying to people-please, and instead focus on those people who make us happy. Choosing to have fewer, more valuable friends leaves you free from the unwanted pressure of trying to juggle your time between too many people. Pause for a moment and think about how you feel. Do you feel as though you are spreading yourself too thin? Do you want to invest more energy and time into people that matter to you? Then it's time to have a reshuffle within your friendship circle and direct your attention to the people who actually benefit your life.

The numbers game

When considering Dunbar's stance that we have 150 meaningful connections, 50 friends, 15 close friends and five loved ones, your true friends who are there for you through thick and thin are those you would include in this magic number five.

Take a moment and think about these five ultimate best friends, and ask yourself whether you are spending enough time with them. Dunbar believes that one of the main reasons we should declutter and refine our friendships is so that we can ensure our time is being shared in an effective and manageable way. Having a small, intimate group of friends means that you can hone in on why these friends make you happy and concentrate on building stronger bonds. Focus on these small, intimate groups of friends and be confident when you decide to walk away from the relationships that are no longer working. You will find you will become happier, more energised and better at managing your time.

LET IT FIZZLE OUT

Ending a friendship is never an easy task, but if you have identified a friendship that is no longer serving you, then it's one that needs to be accomplished. One way of cutting someone out of your life is by slowly reducing contact and the amount of time you are spending with that person. Start by not organising to meet up as frequently, and avoid texting back as often. It might not be easy and you will inevitably miss that person from time to time, but just keep reminding yourself of why you've decided to let go.

AVOID TOXIC PEOPLE

At some stage in our lives, we will inevitably meet someone toxic. Toxic people are draining and negative, and often the kinds of people who require too much energy and time. They are easy to identify because they can leave you feeling anxious and sad. These are the friends that we need to step away from. You can tell them your intentions by simply explaining to them face to face your reasons and walking away with your head held high. Be clear in the direction you are going in and walk away from people who don't make you happy.

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THE MAGIC OF Hugging

Long periods of time without physical interaction can play havoc with our mental health – and there's a big reason why

WORDS FAYE M SMITH

The COVID-19 pandemic changed many things about daily life, especially in relation to social contact. In fact, more than a third* of British people said they would never take hugging for granted again. And there's good reason why staying a metre or two away from our loved ones hit hard and felt more than just inconvenient. "The reality is that hugging – an action humans have done instinctively forever – has a very real impact that reaches far beyond closeness," says psychotherapist and couples therapist Audrey Stephenson. "Through touch we soothe emotionally, regulate neurologically, rest cardiovascularly and connect soulfully. That's a whole lot of loss." Here's why a simple hug can be an instant healer...

Watch out for any warning signs

Oxytocin is also known to boost your mood, while reducing stress and depression. Signs you've been lacking an essential oxytocin release can be subtle, such as a change to your usual eating or drinking habits. "You may also experience sleep disturbances, lack of concentration and irritability," says Dr Meg Arroll, a chartered psychologist with Healthspan. "So, if restrictions mean you cannot hug loved ones, make sure to at least talk about how you're feeling with close friends and family."

The impact on mental health

80%** of adults in the UK said social distancing, or 'physical distancing', as the World Health Organization refers to it, negatively impacted their mental health. Yet hugging, if we're allowed to, could be a quick, cost-free solution. "Hugging has many benefits to our wellbeing," says Dr Rachel Chin, a clinical psychologist from the Pennine Care NHS Foundation Trust. "It triggers the release of the hormone and neurotransmitter oxytocin into our body, higher levels of which are associated with increased feelings of relaxation and security."

> "HUGGING HAS AN IMPACT THAT REACHES FAR BEYOND CLOSENESS"

Why timing is everything

Most of us have felt it – that awkward moment when a hug lasts a fraction longer than we wanted, resulting in a negative feeling. "Our nervous systems respond to a hug, either with complete bodily relaxation (if we have a trusting relationship with the hugger), or we can feel rigid and trapped (if we don't)," says Audrey. Yet sadly, while there's no research to indicate the optimum hug duration, the length can affect the depth of the benefits received. "A quick social hug may act as a connector and bridge to feeling 'we're connected' and 'I exist'," says Audrey. "Yet as you relax into a long hug, you may even align breath or heartbeat with the other person, which can bring inner peace."

It all stems back to childhood

There's another reason why a cuddle makes you feel safe and secure. "Being hugged can tap into muscle memory from being comforted as a child," says Audrey. This is why not being given physical affection in early years can often impact adult relationships. "Human contact is vital over a lifetime," says Dr Arroll. "Without this bonding,we can grow to be insecure in adult relationships, or simply avoid them altogether. But the human mind is open to

EMBRACING THE FUTURE

With fears of new waves of COVID-19 or other pandemics surging into society, the future of being able to hold loved ones close or giving a quick hug to welcome strangers is uncertain. "Other countries and cultures have different greetings, so it's not the only way to welcome others and show affection," says Dr Arroll. "As humans, we are very adaptable. What feels awkward now, such as an elbow-to-elbow bump, could, in time, become part of our physical narrative. However, research shows that although something like a virtual hug may be a nice gesture, it's unlikely to have the same psychological impact."

change – so if you didn't grow up with a secure attachment, you can still develop one later in life through self-awareness or therapy."

Fight off a cold

Ironically, while limiting human contact stops germs from spreading, hugging can actually help you fight off illness. "There's evidence that hugging can build your immune system," says Dr Arroll. "One study of over 400 healthy adults found that hugging boosted protection against contracting a cold. In those who did develop a cold, greater frequency of hugs led to less severe symptoms." Although this shouldn't be a reason to ignore any government guidelines.

Get that 'feel good' factor back

There are some alternatives to hugging. "Smiling, making eye contact and gesturing, in addition to warm verbal expressions, can have similar benefits," says Dr Chin. "Try cuddling a pillow – spraying a calming scent onto the fabric may also help you to feel soothed."

Pets can make a difference

Own a Labrador, Vizsla or Poodle? They were found to be the best dog breeds to improve anxiety levels in their owners***. "Stroking and cuddling a pet triggers a flood of oxytocin, so physical touch with pets can help," says Dr Arroll. The study also found that petting a dog for 15 minutes could lower blood pressure by 10%, and help with Alzheimer's and heart disease. Prefer cats? Sphynx and Ragdoll came out as two of the top depression-beating breeds, possibly due to the affection they demand.

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*Higgidy Simple Pleasures Study May 2020. **Superdrug and My Online Therapy survey. ***Tombola

THE Joy OF LOW-MAINTENANCE FRIENDS

Simply by sharing a smile and a friendly chat with casual acquaintances, you can add a whole new dimension to your wellbeing

WORDS CLAIRE CANTOR

If you're a regular swimmer or dog walker, a local shopper or seasoned visitor to your favourite café, you've probably made some low-stakes, casual friends – people you meet without planning, who share a lighthearted chat or a cheery hello that brightens your day and makes you feel noticed and cared for.

The low-stakes friendship is both fleeting and intimate; advice is shared and troubles are told, but there is no commitment or expectation. It's a pressure-free relationship with feel-good benefits. Here's how to recognise, build and nurture those casual friendships.

DR TIMOTHY SHARP

Dr Sharp is author of *The Happiness Handbook* and *100 Ways to Happiness*, a positive psychologist and mental health advocate.

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KATE LEAVER

Kate is author of *The Friendship Cure*, a journalist and speaker.

KATELEAVER.COM

DR EMMA SEPPÄLÄ

Dr Seppälä is author of *The Happiness Track*, and a research psychologist at Yale University.

EMMASEPPALA.COM

> "FRIENDSHIPS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTOR TO HAPPINESS"

1 FIND FRIENDS

A casual friend is someone you care about, but who doesn't demand too much from you in terms of time investment, energy and emotion. They're more than a mere acquaintance, but not a confidante.

Friendships, and relationships more generally, are the most important contributor to happiness, wellbeing and even longevity, according to Dr Timothy Sharp, and the quality of our relationships essentially determines the quality of our lives. The low-stakes friendship is a straightforward relationship – pure pleasure, like the froth on the top of your coffee.

DO IT ***Cultivate low-maintenance friends – join a regular exercise class, a book group or a choir; visit your local café or set up a 'Conversation Café' (cafe-conversations.co.uk). Invite your neighbours over for a no-fuss morning coffee, or find a local project where you can volunteer for a couple of hours a week.***

2 TRY MICRO INTERACTIONS

A chinwag at the café or a friendly word at the supermarket checkout can provide an essential sense of belonging and self-worth in a fast-moving world. Dr Sharp says positive 'micro interactions' like these boost our mood, increase creativity and build resilience. With studies showing that loneliness can be more of a threat to health than obesity, positive social interactions are even more important.

DO IT ***Ease yourself in with a safe, predictable chat, or ask questions of the other person for minimum exposure. Offer a compliment to a stranger, or help others with heavy bags. Engage in conversation on a shared interest – if you are both holding a book on the train platform, or dog walking, let that be your focus.***

3 TAKE IT AT FACE VALUE

It's human nature to want to feel validated and recognised, appreciated and loved. We may satisfy this need through our family, work or community, but our 'dip in, dip out' friendships provide a generous, agenda-free supply of confidence-building and connection – and we're accepted at face value. Kate Leaver believes that casual friendships can give us a warm, pleasant feeling of being liked, without emotional pressure – and that can be a refreshing relief.

DO IT ***Being aware of how casual friendships can make us feel is a great incentive to foster them. Emma Seppälä reminds us that we are all far more similar than we are different – we all want to be happy, we have all experienced suffering and pain, and we are all both vulnerable and strong. When you remember this about others, you'll feel closer to them and also have the courage to connect with them.***

4 OBSERVE BOUNDARIES

The low-stakes friendship offers freedom from preconceived ideas and demands, yet can also provide a nourishing, high-quality relationship. We're not trapped in set roles in friendships based on activity and casual chat.

DO IT ***Make the most of 'no-strings-attached' friendships by keeping the focus away from yourself and onto the activity you share. Enjoy a shared moment, or an idea, rather than delving into your inner world, and you'll feel uplifted by a pleasant, weightless relationship.***

5 BE OPEN

Interacting with a diverse range of people and building healthy relationships brings colour and fullness to our lives. Dr Sharp says that by having a wide circle of friendships and interactions, we open ourselves up to having a broader and more varied range of life experiences. The key is to avoid making assumptions and judging others, he says, which isn't always easy! But if we can avoid prejudging, we'll give ourselves the best chance to find, foster and develop a rich network of friends – and a casual mate could turn into a best friend forever.

DO IT ***Keep things low-key by showing interest in people's life experiences – you'll be surprised by how much you will have in common. We have so much to learn from each other, the challenges others have been through, and their perspective on life.***

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WHAT IT MEANS TO BE *lonely*

We all might experience loneliness at some time. It's an emotional response that's different for everyone and has little to do with being physically alone

WORDS JULIE BASSETT

We often conflate loneliness with being alone or socially isolated. It's true that being alone can bring about feelings of loneliness, but it's also possible to feel intensely lonely while surrounded by people, just as it's possible to feel completely content in absolute solitude.

According to the Campaign to End Loneliness, 'Loneliness happens when the social connections that people want don't match their actual experience of relationships with others. It is an emotional response, and as such, it is important that we draw more on the insights from psychology than is currently the case'.

Loneliness is a personal, emotional experience. The sense of being lonely might mean something entirely different to you than it does to someone else. Loneliness occurs when your personal social needs are not being met, whether that's in the form of quantity or quality.

You can have a great social life, go out frequently, chat to colleagues and rarely be alone but still feel lacking in a strong, deep, meaningful connection with any one person. How much and what kind of social contact we need to feel content is very much personal. Some people can be completely content and happy with very little physical social contact.

There are many factors that contribute towards loneliness, and you may experience loneliness even if nothing obvious changes in your social contact or close relationships. There are links to our mental health, for example. While loneliness in itself is not a mental health problem, having an existing mental health problem can increase your chances of feeling lonely according to Mind, the mental health charity.

Social anxiety can prevent people from making new connections, and a perceived stigma around discussing mental health conditions can cause others to withdraw from friends and family. On the flipside, feeling lonely can also contribute to an increased risk of certain mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety or low self-esteem.

Mental health is just one potential cause of loneliness, but there are other triggers. For some, a loss can cause feelings of loneliness, whether this is a bereavement, the breakdown of a relationship or a family estrangement. Going through major life shifts can also be a factor, such as changing jobs, retiring or moving to a new area. Each of these situations can change our social circle and contact.

For some people, loneliness is linked to certain events or times of the year, such as Christmas or throughout the winter. Some groups of people are more likely to feel lonely than others, including older people, adolescents, single parents without a support network, carers, those with disabilities that may exclude them from some social activities, or those who belong to a minority group and don't live in an area

among those from a similar background. However, loneliness doesn't discriminate and it can impact any of us, either for short periods of time or chronically.

Not only that, loneliness can have a huge impact on other areas of our lives. We've already mentioned how it can contribute to an increased risk of mental health conditions, but ongoing feelings of loneliness can also affect our physical health too. The longer we feel lonely, the greater the impact. Sustained periods of loneliness can increase cardiovascular health risks, increase blood pressure and impact on the immune system.

Some of us are more inclined to feel lonely than others. If you take two people in identical circumstances, with the same number of social connections and contacts, same work and living conditions, and the same mental and physical health, it's entirely possible for one to feel intense feelings of loneliness and the other to be completely content. It comes down to those things that make us feel a sense of belonging and connection. For some, spending time with other people is important to fulfilling their social needs; for others, there are different ways to get that same sense of contentment.

One study suggests that increasingly in modern society we can engage our sense of belonging without seeing another person through other activities instead. The study uses a 'fuel' metaphor for understanding our social needs. You need to have enough fuel in the tank to feel socially fulfilled; if the tank runs low and you're running on empty, loneliness may inevitably creep in.

This tank is often filled through traditional 'fuel' such as spending time with friends and family, but there are other types of fuel that can fill the tank too. This might be spending time with a pet, which can be an enormous source of comfort. Passive activities such as watching a favourite film or TV show, listening to music or scrolling through social media can also bring about strong feelings of belonging.

Social media, however, can conversely be a cause of loneliness, projecting other people's lives into our own and inviting unfavourable comparisons. Yet for some, following the accounts of people they like and feel a connection with can offer a sense of fulfilment – again stressing just how individual the triggers of loneliness can be.

> "SOME OF US ARE MORE INCLINED TO FEEL LONELY THAN OTHERS"

This idea of seeking connections in order to prevent loneliness links in with the concept of mindfulness. Allowing ourselves to become fully absorbed in a particular task or activity and thereby focusing our mind solely on what we are doing can increase that feeling of contentment.

Engaging in regular exercise that you enjoy, spending time cooking from a recipe and concentrating on the method and flavours, reading a good book, walking outdoors in nature, doing a puzzle – all these activities, when done with mindful intention, can help you to form stronger connections with the world around you and increase your sense of belonging.

Of course, what works for one person might not work for another; we all have our own interests that we can get lost in. The more we can do these activities that fulfil us, mindfully and with active presence, the less likely we are to feel lonely, even when we are physically alone.

It's important to recognise feelings of loneliness and validate them. Only by understanding what we are experiencing can we start to look for the solutions that will help us to feel more connected and content in our lives. This is the most vital step in the battle against feeling lonely.

TIPS IF YOU'RE FEELING LONELY

RECONNECT WITH PEOPLE

If you're feeling lonely because of a lack of physical interaction, take the initiative to open a conversation. Send an email, letter or message to someone. It can be scary to put yourself out there, but it could lead to rediscovering a bond.

PRACTISE GRATITUDE

Try to get into the habit of practising gratitude. Write down three things you're grateful for in your life each day, no matter how small. This can increase feelings of contentment and belonging.

SPEAK OUT

It can be really hard to talk about feeling lonely, but the chances are many people are feeling the same way. Open up to a friend or family member. If you don't have anyone you feel you can talk to, there are listening services and forums where you can talk to someone about how you are feeling.

JOIN IN

Joining a club can help you to find new connections. This could be a physical club, such as a running club or craft group, or an online club. There are all kinds of clubs to suit every hobby and shared interest, such as book clubs, wine clubs, supper clubs and knitting groups. Having a space to indulge in a hobby you love and talk to others about it can really help with your sense of belonging.

SLOW DOWN

Loneliness can increase feelings of stress, so try to take some time to slow down. Make sure you're getting enough sleep, take some mindful walks, practise yoga or have a hot bath – give yourself time to wind down and enhance feelings of calm. This can help you to develop a more positive mindset, which can help to tackle those feelings of loneliness.

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WHAT IS Love?

From biochemical addiction to evolutionary perks, discover the science behind our most powerful emotion

WORDS AILSA HARVEY

The word 'love' is often thrown around and associated with almost anything we feel drawn to. Whether it is a person, an object or an abstract idea, you can love them all. But what does it really mean to love? Films often feature romantic love as part of the main plot. Its unpredictability, intensity and power make for an exciting storyline – just as it does in reality. While fiction often plays with an overly simplified, romanticised view of it, love is more than a fairy-tale dream. Love experienced in real life is a complex affair.

Where in the body do you feel love? It can feel like it is taking over your entire being, and most of your body does actually experience physical changes. Your heart is just one of the impacted organs, but it is also the one that we romanticise the most. As we come to terms with the uncontrollable feelings of initial attraction to another person, our hearts can get overstimulated. At the core of our being, it is one of the most obvious effects we notice. The heart has become the symbol of love, dating back as far as the Middle Ages.

The first feeling we may associate with being in love is usually euphoria, but from the moment you discover an attraction to someone to the latter stages of love, a range of sensations take over. From compassion and desire to obsession and anxiety, both positive and negative emotions can come into play.

What makes this feeling even more overwhelming is its uncontrollable factor. Love is felt subconsciously, to the extent that some people who are in love don't even realise they are. But love doesn't exist purely to add a touch of excitement to your life. Your body responds to further meaning »

relationships in order to keep the human race alive.

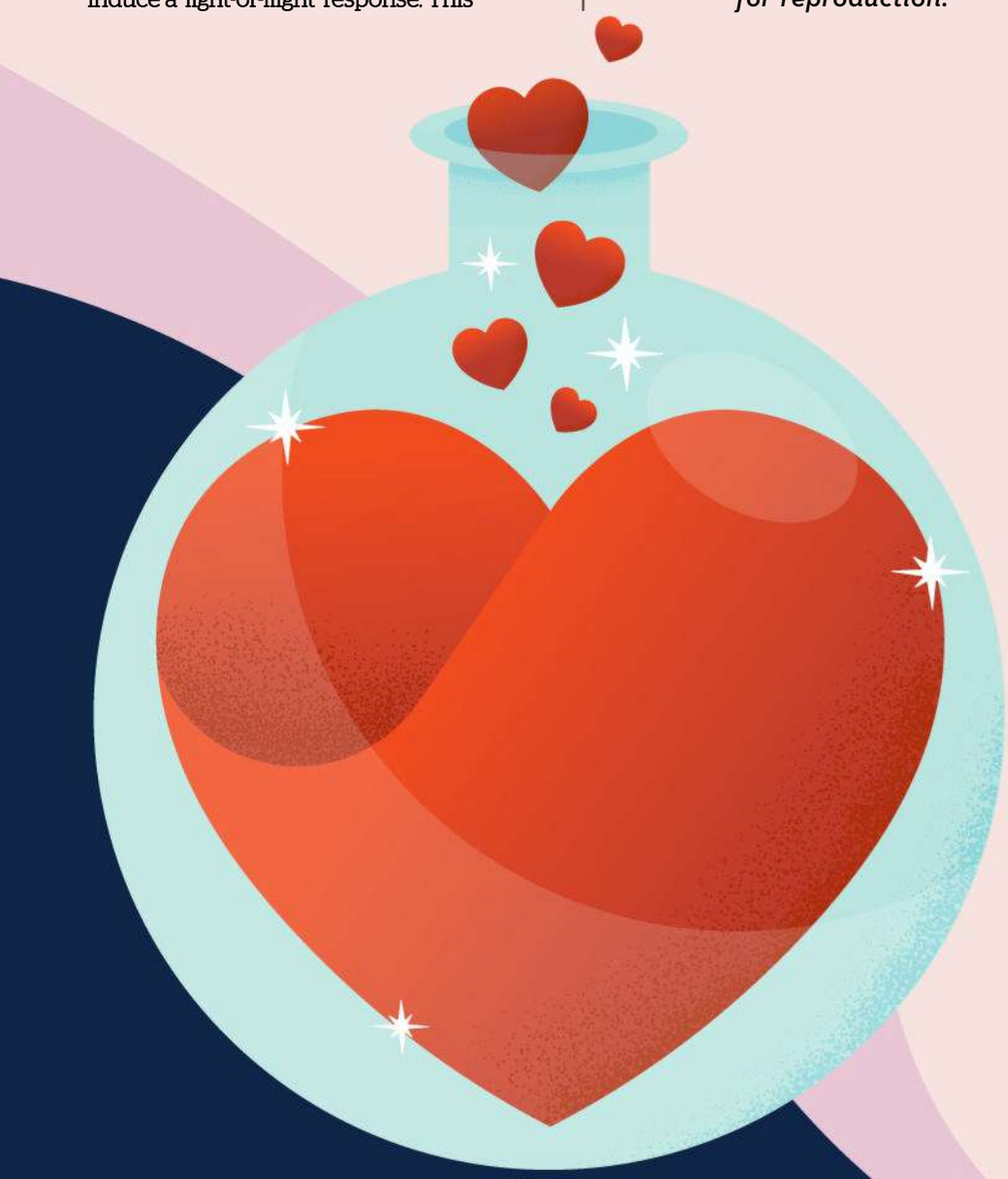
Although less important in our modern world of 7.8 billion people, when survival was more of a priority before the dawn of civilisation, the human body evolved to keep reproduction levels high. The ability to form this intense connection and attachment to another human being led to procreation and a parental team who were able to work happily together to protect their offspring and ensure that they thrive.

While the science behind love is intriguing to study, translating these reactions in the body into feelings is likely different for each person based on their body and unique experiences. Love has connotations of eternal happiness, but not everyone is built to manage these feelings. For two people to establish a trusting and growing relationship, being open to accepting love is essential. In the early stages, the body becomes vulnerable as physical and chemical changes induce a 'fight-or-flight' response. This is due to emotional strain being outside of comfortable levels. In some people who have experienced trauma, this fight-or-flight function becomes overdeveloped, as their bodies are used to danger. Each individual's brain needs to get used to rewarding the body with the chemicals of love. From there, connections with other humans can grow and be explored.

What happens to our bodies?

When we experience feelings of love, the following hormones and chemicals get to work in our bodies:

TESTOSTERONE
The male sex hormone
During lust, this hormone is found to be at high levels in males, while during the latter stages levels are reduced to normal. This chemical, which increases desire for physical connection, is essential for reproduction.



ADRENALINE
The heart-racer
Released in the body to prepare you for 'fight or flight', this natural stimulant is responsible for the rapid heart rate you may develop. Produced during times of excitement, it causes more blood to flood to the heart.

OXYTOCIN
The contentment creator
This chemical establishes a deeper connection. Skin-to-skin contact causes the neurotransmitter to be released and creates the close bond long-term partners share. This isn't exclusive to romantic love, and is also used to create a connection between parents and children.

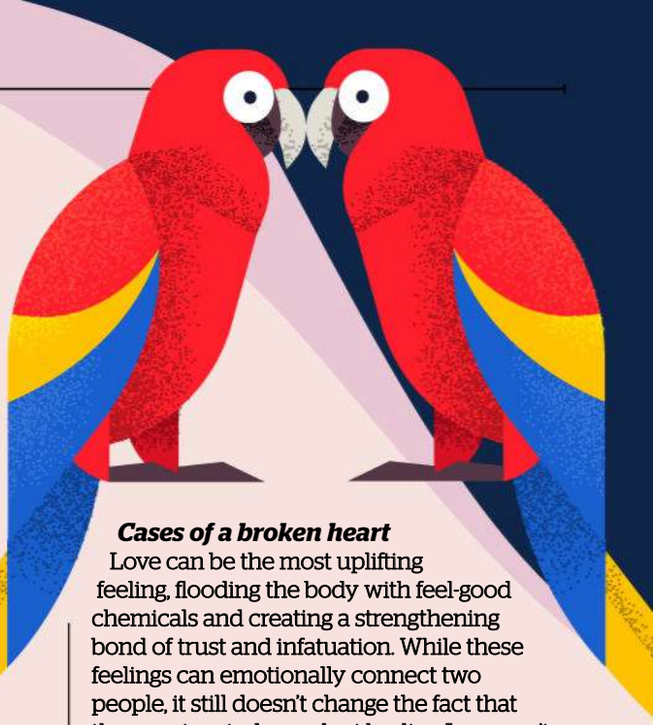
NORADRENALINE
The attention-setter
Similar to adrenaline, noradrenaline gets the heart beating faster and induces feelings of excitement. However, it also increases your attention on one person and prioritises your short-term memory to keep you living in the moment through love.

VASOPRESSIN
The monogamy maker
Similar to oxytocin, vasopressin establishes part of the attachment phase. This particular chemical has been linked to loyalty between couples.

OESTROGEN
The female sex hormone
Produced by the ovaries as well as the adrenal glands and fat cells, oestrogen increases a woman's desire for physical contact during the lust stage. Abnormally low levels of this hormone can negatively impact general mood.

DOPAMINE
The rewarder
This neurotransmitter is used by your nervous system to send messages through the body. When in love, this chemical activates the reward circuit and creates a sense of pleasure from being in love.

SEROTONIN
The under-performer
During the attraction phase, production of this chemical has been shown to reduce. Creating a chemical



> YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF ATTRACTED TO THOSE WHO DON'T SMELL LIKE YOU

SNIFFING OUT THE PERFECT PARTNER

You might discover a lover based on initial visual attraction, their beaming personality that comes through during the first conversation you share or maybe even through a recommendation from a mutual friend. However, what you may not have known is that you are subconsciously analysing their genetic make-up. This might not be the first thing you grow to love about someone, but your sense of smell creates an attraction to people with a different immune system to your own. As an incredibly beneficial evolutionary tool, our bodies aim to partner up with someone with the potential to create offspring with the best chance of survival.

This is possible because a person's unique smell is created by the same sets of genes that make up their immune system, enabling us to detect differences in genes through scent. The saying 'opposites attract' couldn't be more applicable in this situation. While you may not notice the subtle scents of everyone around you, your brain does. More often than not, you will find yourself attracted to those who don't smell like you.

balance similar to someone with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), this could be the reason some people show obsessive qualities during love.

ENDORPHINS
The painkillers
Released to create a soothing feeling, these are the body's natural painkillers. During physical contact with a loved one, endorphins increase and create a positive mood. Long-term relationships are thought to rely on this chemical.

PHENYLETHYLAMINE
The love drug
Released by the brain, this molecule stimulates the entire central nervous system. Naturally creating addictive properties similar to those found in the drug MDMA and coffee, this chemical creates the initial, intense feelings during lust.

The science of monogamy

When we think of monogamous creatures, we tend to think of scarlet macaws or swans, although despite swans forming monogamous bonds that last for many years (sometimes for life), they have been known to 'divorce'. Of the 5,000 species of mammal on the planet, between 3% and 5% are monogamous. This statistic means that species that remain faithful to only one mate or partner are in the minority. So why do so many of us fall in love for life?

We are not as monogamous as some animals, such as geese, who may not mate for the rest of their life if their partner were to die. However, with a significant proportion of our population looking to 'find the one', what happens in our bodies to keep us going back to the same person? Oxytocin, the hormone often referred to as 'the love hormone', is responsible for strengthening monogamous relationships. Creating a bond to the person you have connected romantically with, the hormone is used to reward the brain. The more intense response created makes any interaction with that one person feel better than interaction with anyone else.

Cases of a broken heart

Love can be the most uplifting feeling, flooding the body with feel-good chemicals and creating a strengthening bond of trust and infatuation. While these feelings can emotionally connect two people, it still doesn't change the fact that they are two independent bodies. Love can't be forced, and as many cases prove, it doesn't always last.

Heartbreak may be used to describe the emotional rollercoaster that is rejection, but broken heart syndrome is much more than simply feeling low; it's brought on by severe emotional trauma or a physical event of high intensity. While causes include some of the downfalls of love, such as divorce, infidelity, the death of a loved one and serious arguments, the syndrome isn't limited to love.

When the body is exposed to these situations, an influx of stress hormones take over. These are thought to cause the heart's main arteries to constrict in size, reducing the flow of blood in the heart. The effects of this usually include pain in the chest and difficulty breathing, but in a small number of cases this heartbreak can lead to death.

Q&A

DR MICHAEL MERZENICH

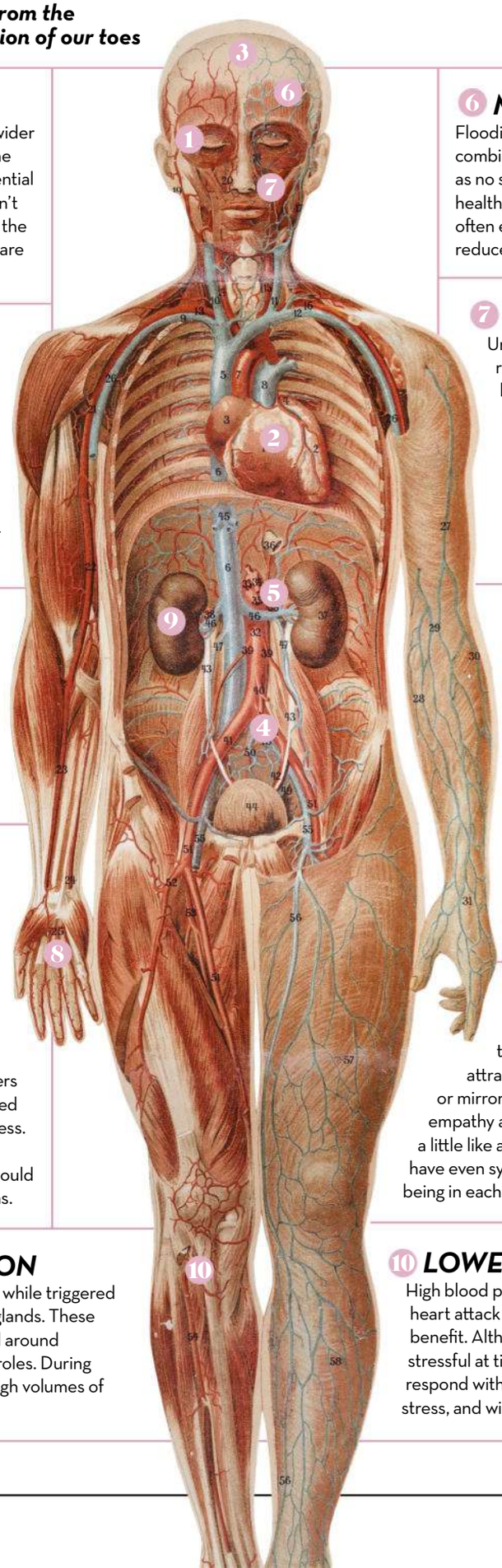
As a pioneering neuroscientist, Dr Merzenich has been granted close to 100 patents. Using five decades of research into brain plasticity, he explains the brain's key role during love.

Is love a real feeling, or a concept based on a series of strong feelings in the brain?

Love is the real convergence of powerful neurological effects that distort your emotional balance in a wonderful form. Our brains are designed to support that progression to love, of course. That critical progression to procreation and loyal partner support is key to the survival of »

HOW DOES LOVE AFFECT THE BODY?

Love takes over our entire body, from the chemicals in our head to the position of our toes



1 PUPIL DILATION

When you like what you see, your pupils get wider to allow more light in. This feature is part of the 'fight-or-flight' response to help evaluate potential threats. However, the love of your life often isn't a threat, and this response is usually linked to the production of oxytocin and dopamine, which are direct inducers of pupil dilation.

2 QUICKENING HEART

When you feel physically or emotionally stressed, hormones called catecholamines are sent into the bloodstream. At the beginning of a relationship, people often feel nervous excitement before seeing their partner. In this higher emotional state, the hormones released are responsible for increasing your heart rate and can cause your senses to be on high alert.

3 PAIN REDUCTION

Love is sometimes referred to as a drug, as it can quite literally act as a painkiller. When thinking of or spending time with a loved one, changes occur in areas of the brain that are impacted by morphine and cocaine. These effects usually happen during the early stages.

4 EXPERIENCING BUTTERFLIES

Conjuring the romantic imagery of delicate fluttery creatures, the saying 'I've got butterflies' refers to the connection between mind and stomach instigated by love. Cranial nerves help link the brain to other areas of your body, and being the longest of these, the vagus nerve connects to the gut. To create this feeling, the nerve triggers involuntary contractions in the stomach, caused by the brain's chemical response to nervousness. While it's not entirely known what the main purpose of this is as a survival mechanism, it could be the body's way of forcing out harmful toxins.

5 HORMONE PRODUCTION

Many of the hormones produced during love, while triggered by your brain, are produced by your adrenal glands. These are then released into the blood and pumped around your body in order to carry out their specific roles. During different stages of love, the brain is sending high volumes of signals to these glands, keeping them busy.

6 MENTAL HEALTH

Flooding the brain with an unfamiliar and complex combination of hormones and other chemicals, it comes as no surprise that love alters aspects of our mental health. Possessing a strong connection to someone else often enables people to manage stress, and can help reduce symptoms of anxiety and depression.

7 PHEROMONE FEELS

Unlike the majority of hormones your body releases, pheromones are released outside the body. While you are secreting these chemicals, produced in your sweat, saliva and urine, you are also picking them up from other people. Detected in the nasal cavity, pheromones can act as chemical messengers, making you attracted to someone nearby. It is this phenomenon that may explain some people's belief in love at first sight.

8 SWEATY PALMS

Through a combination of the hormones noradrenaline and adrenaline, your palms can turn into a clammy mess in nervous anticipation. Often you sweat when your body increases in temperature as evaporation works to cool you down. In these cases, your veins get larger. However, in the case of excitement or nervousness your veins constrict, as no cooling process is required. The built-up emotional stress that comes with seeing a love interest causes the body to prepare for a range of eventualities. Sweaty hands can increase friction, tactile sensitivity and skin toughness.

9 SYNCHRONISATION

Observations of two people in love have shown that we subconsciously mimic those we are attracted to. Whether we turn our feet to face them or mirror their body language, this demonstrates the empathy and unity being created between two people, a little like a pair of dancers. In some cases couples in love have even synchronised their breathing rates naturally by being in each other's presence.

10 LOWER BLOOD PRESSURE

High blood pressure can increase the chances of having a heart attack or stroke, so you could think of love as a health benefit. Although many see the early stages as particularly stressful at times, after falling in love people generally respond with less stress. Social bonds with a partner reduce stress, and with this comes a lower blood pressure.

our social species. Love is more than lust or procreation. It's also about stable bonding and enduring attachments.

Through the brain's reward process, is all happiness capable of developing into love?

'Love' is a sloppy word. I might 'love' football because I've seen my team have so many wonderful successes and celebrated them so cheerfully many times in my past. I have learned to associate football with rewarding. I may 'love' my garden or my pub or my job. This use of 'love' explains neurological attachment, but this is quite a different thing from the love of another person, where there are more physical and chemical factors in play.

That person has a rich array of ways to interact with me – by voice, touch and emotion – that reward and surprise me. It is this combination that can excite me. And every kindness I deliver to them that they respond to also excites me through the same neurological processes. When two individuals do this well, that mutual co-excitation is just about the most powerful way that your brain can be engaged.

Are some brains more susceptible to love than others?

Sure. The machinery in the brain is constantly developing. Its health and powers are a product of their historic use. We 'exercise' them as we live a hopefully stimulating and rewarding life – and some lives are a lot more positively stimulating than others. A person who has had a terribly non-rewarding life will take longer to find themselves smitten. In addition, a kind and generous person is exercising their brain in ways that help set them up for love.

What do you find the most fascinating about the brain's role in love?

It's all rather miraculous. And yet, it's still all blood-and-guts biology. As a scientist, I've been very interested in how our evolution of these processes can come at a price. The rewarding and stimulating processes can go awry, creating a major source of human suffering. Sometimes this can cause issues with mental illness, addiction, criminality and violence. How can a person both love and beat their partner?

We are a long way down the path to answering questions like that one. We are working to evolve strategies for helping individuals to drive their brain out of the kinds of ditches they can fall into – back to the thriving, loving human mainstream.

How much more is there to learn about love and the brain – do we have it all sussed?

Like many things in brain science, we have a pretty good understanding of it as a complex sequence of processes. We can see it happening in the brain through its major steps. At the same time, truly experiencing love is not the same as describing it through all of this organic biology, and it comes in diverse forms. I was very lucky to experience it as a young man – in my case with a mate for life – then with our progeny and their progeny and with my own parents. I have found love of different sorts, such as with a beloved friend and a dog or two. ■

> "AT THE BEGINNING, THE PURPOSE IS TO HAVE A PHYSICAL RELATIONSHIP"

THE 3 STAGES OF FALLING IN LOVE

LUST

During the lust phase, men and women release the hormones testosterone and oestrogen. Oestrogen is released by women and initiates a feeling of longing for physical closeness. Testosterone is produced by men, but females also produce it in smaller amounts. This hormone, like oestrogen, increases sex drive and establishes the first stage of falling in love. At the beginning, the purpose is to have a physical relationship, rather than an emotional connection, which is yet to be built upon.

ATTRACTION

The second stage continues some of the feelings felt through lust, but incorporates more of the emotional impacts. You will know if you have reached the second stage if you find your heart beating faster when around the person, you begin to feel nervous upon meeting them and you start to channel almost all of your attention on them. If you hear someone refer to being in the 'honeymoon phase' or saying that they have 'caught feelings', they are likely to be in this stage. This point in the process can instigate feelings of euphoria, but unfortunately it usually only lasts for a matter of months.

ATTACHMENT

As the relationship becomes more established, hormones responsible for human bonding come into play. Oxytocin is the main hormone responsible for the differentiation in this final stage of falling in love. Working to create a strong emotional attachment, this hormone is released along with dopamine – the hormone responsible for happiness. As you have continuous contact with one partner, the levels of dopamine released alongside the oxytocin provide a sense of reward and keep couples returning back to the same person. This stage also establishes a sense of security and a need to protect the other.

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WHAT'S YOUR ATTACHMENT Style?

Getting to grips with your attachment style caused by past trauma could improve your current romantic partnership

WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

Do you wonder why you feel insecure in relationships or avoid intimacy with your partner, especially if you haven't experienced any significant ruptures in your adult relationships, such as infidelity or divorce?

It could be down to your attachment style – this is how you relate to other people – and is known in the field of psychology as 'attachment theory'. According to British psychologist, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby, our adult relationships are the result of the relationship we had with our primary caregivers as infants.

> "OUR ADULT RELATIONSHIPS ARE THE RESULT OF THE RELATIONSHIP WE HAD WITH OUR PRIMARY CAREGIVERS AS INFANTS"

Intrigued? We've asked our experts for the lowdown on the four different attachment styles – secure, anxious, avoidant and anxious-avoidant – and how to change yours if you think it could be affecting your love life.

How it all starts

Relationship in a rut? The issue could have started when you were very young. "For a child's social and emotional development, they need to form a relationship with at least one primary caregiver," explains Neil Wilkie, relationship expert, psychotherapist and founder of The Relationship Paradigm (relationshipparadigm.com). "This attachment normally develops through four stages from about six months up until the age of about three."

From childhood to adulthood

Early childhood lays the foundation for how we experience the world throughout our lives. And – just like the foundation of a house – stability is incredibly important. However, as humans, we're able to adapt to our situations and will manage to survive a shaky start. What does happen though, is we create defensive behaviours that allow this survival. And while they might serve us in our childhood, when we bring these (unconscious) thought patterns and behaviours into our romantic relationships, they can be problematic.

"That is the core of attachment theory," says psychotherapist Audrey Stephenson (audreystephenson.co.uk). "Without a conscious effort to address imbalances and wounds, early relationships with our caregivers form a kind of blueprint for the relationships we have as adults."

SECURE ATTACHMENT

"Having a secure attachment style means that your needs were met in early childhood, or that you have worked hard to get here," says Neil.

These needs include:

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Such as being soothed when you were upset and being listened to when you expressed how you were feeling. »

SECURITY
You felt safe and that your basic needs for survival were met, such as shelter, food, protection from harm, and medical care.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE
Being met with love and compassion even when your parents were angry or frustrated with you.

STRUCTURE
Including rules, limits and boundaries. This helps a child predict how an adult will behave, and how to behave themselves.

Common attributes of those with a secure upbringing are:

You're able to establish emotional intimacy and trust people. You're comfortable with being alone, but you're also comfortable in a relationship.

You have a positive self-image, a strong sense of self, and healthy self-esteem.

You're warm and straightforward with others, and able to open up about your feelings.

You're comfortable with mutual dependency: you like being able to rely on others and have others rely on you.

You're aware of your emotions and can easily express them.

ANXIOUS ATTACHMENT

An anxious attachment style is the result of having an unpredictable and critical caregiver. "The roots of this attachment style are based on perceived neglect – the parents did not necessarily actively neglect the child, but the child perceived that his or her needs were not met," explains Neil.

Growing up, people with this attachment style start to prioritise the needs of others while neglecting their own. "They expect that, if they are nice and caring to someone, he or she will like them and take care of them in return. This turns into preoccupation with the needs of others and leads to lack of sense of self," says Neil.

Common attributes of those with anxious upbringing are:

You prioritise others.

You struggle being alone; you crave relationships and intimacy.

You have relatively low self-esteem and seek validation from others.

In relationships, you often exhibit clingy and needy behaviours. On the other hand, you're sensitive towards your partner's needs and preoccupied with taking care of them, which might cause them to feel suffocated by you.

You fear that you will scare people away and that they will reject, criticise or abandon you.

You can get extremely upset when you receive disapproval (in any form).

When your partner is unavailable and spends time away from your relationship, you can become jealous, frustrated and resentful.

You overanalyse and worry excessively about relationships. At the same time, you easily ignore or misread signs of relational issues.

AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

"The roots of avoidant attachment are based on perceived rejection: the parents did not necessarily reject the child actively, but the child's needs were not met, which was perceived as a form of rejection," says Neil.

"Children with this attachment style grow up to be independent and self-sufficient. They have learned to rely on themselves and not on others. This doesn't necessarily mean that such individuals do not want to have relationships. It's just that the dismissive characteristics are getting in the way."

SO, HOW DOES THIS IMPACT YOUR RELATIONSHIPS?

Confusion can arise in a relationship without an awareness of attachment theory. "Understanding your attachment style can help you to recognise what you really need for a truly successful partnership," says Dr Madeleine Mason Roantree, psychologist, dating coach and director of relationship psychology services at The Vida Consultancy (thevidaconsultancy.com). "Whatever your attachment style, effective communication is at the core of developing a healthy relationship."

As Amir Levine and Rachel SF Heller explain in their book, *Attached: The New Science of Adult Attachment and How it Can Help You Find – and Keep – Love* (£8.85/$10.65, Amazon), it's important to speak openly and honestly with your partner about your feelings. Expressing your concerns in a loving way will help you figure out if your partner is right for you and, if they are, help you to maintain a successful relationship.

"For those who have an anxious attachment style, understand that they need reassurance that they're loved and wanted, and a simple remedy should they get distressed," says Dr Mason Roantree. "For those who are avoidant, understand that it can feel overwhelming for them to let go of their sense of independence and need for space, and perhaps need support to trust that it's okay to open up and share feelings."

"EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IS AT THE CORE OF A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP"

Common attributes of those with avoidant upbringing are:

You avoid being emotionally intimate with others, and tend to pull away when someone tries to get close to you.

You're uncomfortable with opening up to others.

You exhibit dismissive behaviours; you seem distant and aloof and tend to minimise your emotional expressions.

You see yourself as self-sufficient. At the same time, you might exhibit a false self to the world.

You find it hard to get close to, trust, and rely on others. You prefer to rely on yourself.

ANXIOUS-AVOIDANT ATTACHMENT

As the name would suggest, an anxious-avoidant attachment style is someone who is both anxious and avoidant in their relationships. What this means is you push people away when they get close, yet you desperately crave intimacy and connection. "This attachment style is based on perceived fear – the child starts to perceive the source of safety (the caregivers) as a source of fear or unpredictability," says Neil.

"Sometimes, parents are tentative. They appear to be frightened by the child and lack confidence in parenting. At other times, parents are scary and frightening. They might be too aggressive or become threatening in a way that overstimulates the child."

In more extreme cases, the parents are abusive. "The other strong contributing factor to the development of anxious-avoidant attachment is parents who have highly dissociated themselves – because they have unresolved loss or trauma," says Neil.

Common signs of this attachment style are:

You show contradictory behaviours in intimate relationships. Sometimes, you're clingy and needy, and at other times dismissive and distant.

You often exhibit instability, upheaval and storminess in your intimate relationships.

You often feel helpless in life and you tend to have poor goal-oriented behaviour.

You want to be in a relationship but have a hard time bonding with, opening up to, and trusting others. You fear that your partner will abandon, reject or hurt you.

If you feel you need help from a past childhood trauma, which is affecting your relationships or general happiness, make an appointment to see a doctor for a referral or local recommendations for a counsellor. Or research relationship therapists in your area.

> "YOU PUSH PEOPLE AWAY WHEN THEY GET CLOSE, YET YOU CRAVE INTIMACY AND CONNECTION"

CAN OUR STYLES CHANGE?

"Our attachment models are not set in stone. One person will not necessarily display the same levels of anxiety and avoidance over time or across different relationships," says Dr Mason Roantree.

So how does this happen? "It essentially comes down to the life experiences and relationships we have in later life. For example, if you have an anxious-avoidant attachment style, being around attachment figures who are consistently supportive and responsive can help you learn secure behaviours."

One way for this to happen is through going to therapy. "The relationship you build with your therapist reflects how you engage in relationships, and as you continue in therapy you learn to tolerate difficult feelings better and how to voice your thoughts and concerns which you might not ordinarily do in a way that gets heard," adds Dr Mason Roantree.

"Most therapy forms will be able to address this, although the relational therapies are probably most effective, such as person-centred therapy, psychodynamic therapy and third wave CBT." Third wave CBT is a type of holistic therapy that attempts to understand the client as a whole person – which focuses on the connection between their body, spirit and mind.

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SEPARATENESS AS A PRECONDITION FOR Connection

Expectations in romantic relationships are higher than ever. Love has never been so paradoxical. So how can we balance our need for togetherness alongside our need for separateness?

WORDS LEAH LARWOOD

We are living in a remarkable age – especially when it comes to eroticism. We're living longer than ever before, and in many cases, looking to the same person to give us security, stability, identity, pleasure and spontaneity. It's a paradox. Never before have our expectations of romantic relationships taken on such ambitious proportions.

Esther Perel is a Belgian-American psychotherapist, known for her work on human relationships. Perel promotes the concept of 'erotic intelligence' in her book *Mating in Captivity: Unlocking Erotic Intelligence*. During her research she has explored the paradox of love and sex. She unpicks how we crave the depth and beauty of a love-filled relationship, yet we also desire a spontaneous and adventurous sex life.

Historically, sexual problems were often deemed as a relational problem, and it was said that if you fix the relationship, sex will follow. However, in Perel's experience, the relationship would improve but things in the bedroom would not necessarily change. Noticing this inspired her to research the nature of erotic desire in long-term relationships.

She observed that this is the first time in history where we are trying to experience sexuality in the long-term, and not because we need to procreate hordes of children to support the household and wider family or community. It's the first time we want sex that is rooted in desire rather than concerned with procreation.

Understanding separateness

In psychology, separateness refers to the development of the individual as a self-contained and independent unit. It also points to individuation, differentiation, and autonomy – each of these are developmental achievements that lead to a stable sense of self as separate with a clear sense of goals and values.

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Specifically, the key element of Jungian psychology is individuation, which is similar to separateness – the physiological, psychological, and sociocultural processes by which a person attains status as an individual human being and exerts themself as such in the world.

Defining human connection

Human connection is-the sense of closeness and belongingness a person can experience when having supportive relationships with those around them. Connection is when two or more people interact with each other and each person feels valued, seen and heard. Human connection is an important part of what we need – not only does it lead to increased fulfilment but also improved quality of life.

Two needs: security and adventure

In her work, Perel wanted to know what it is about our generation that wants desire for one another so much but doesn't always have it. What sustains desire and why is it so difficult? What are the fears and obstacles that stand in the way of passion and excitement?

Fundamentally, when it comes to romantic relationships we have two human needs. There's the need for predictability, safety, dependability and permanence – all the anchoring experiences. But we also have a strong need for adventure, novelty, mystery, risk, change and surprise. We want our partner to give us all of these things, and be our best friend, as well as our passionate partner, all while we are living far longer than we were a hundred years ago.

In her famous TED Talk, 'The Secret to Desire in a Long-term Relationship', Perel is famous for unravelling how we are now asking one person to give us what a village once gave us. She says that we ask »

> "WE ARE NOW ASKING ONE PERSON TO GIVE US WHAT A WHOLE VILLAGE ONCE GAVE US"

our partner to: "Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, and give me transcendence, mystery and awe all in one. Give me comfort, give me edge, give me novelty, give me familiarity, give me predictability, give me surprise."

However, Perel has noted that when people become fused, authentic connection can become harder – and then there is no one to connect with. Therefore, separateness is a precondition for connection. So how can we achieve this when we crave both security and closeness?

The psychology of confluence

Another way to examine this paradox of human connection and separateness is by exploring the idea of confluence – a term used in psychology to describe the process of flowing into one another between two or more people. In confluence, depending on the degree, there can be a loss of perception or denial of differences between people.

In geographical terms, confluence describes the place where two rivers merge into one. When the term is used in psychology, it carries a similar meaning whereby it explains the merging or dissolving of a person's behaviour and attitude with another's, leading to a lack of differentiation.

We can recognise confluence expressed in various ways, such as flocking together, harmony, togetherness, unions and synchronisation. However, although confluence is a natural part of daily life, sometimes it can lead to problematic situations and dynamics – such as when we become 'the same' and lose a sense of self.

Healthy versus unhealthy confluence

Beneficial functions of confluence include the act of making love or when we lose a sense of self dancing at a gig or singing in a choir. In fact, merging with the environment can feel blissful. For example, when completing a piece of work with colleagues or art with fellow creatives, we might experience times when we're in flow with others who are also in flow. Confluence is an experience that is universal and can bring joy. However, there are times when this 'togetherness' might not serve us.

Psychologist Dr Alison McClymont, based at the London Psychiatry Clinic and The Soke, explains, "When intimacy is confused with an 'ownership of the other' it melts in to a space that Esther Perel defines as fusion. Perel argues that contrary to what many couples believe, who struggle with sexual passion and drive within their relationship, it is not a lack of closeness but too much closeness that impedes desire. In other words it is not necessarily not enough connection with the other that creates a dissonance in sexual chemistry, but too much of a style of connection that forms a whole, rather than two separate parts, dancing together.

"To put this in another way, I often find myself wincing when a person says to me 'but he/she is a part of me', as what I view this as is not necessarily the intimate bonding that the person believes this to be, but enmeshment – a state of bonding where boundaries are permeable and unclear, and the self has been split and transmuted on to the separate being of another. There is no 'dance' here, there is only holding, there is no push and pull that constitutes sexual attraction, there is a death grip."

Although confluence or 'fusing' can become unhealthy, it feels important to acknowledge that it can be a helpful coping strategy for certain situations, and in others, a way of connecting and enjoying special moments with other people. At other times, what

3 TIPS FOR COUPLES BY DR SARAH BISHOP

- *View clashes and disagreements as learning opportunities.*
- Respect your own individuality and that of your partner: you both have needs of equal importance.
- *Stick with it. A truly secure and intimate connection takes time to build. Love is an art, which requires tending to over time and can never truly be perfected; it will require ongoing reflection and effort.*

can be useful is to observe our responses to others and to take stock of whether we might be leaning too much on their way of being, their beliefs, approach or system.

Surrender and autonomy

Perel also says that love rests on two pillars: surrender and autonomy. Commenting on this concept, Dr McClymont says, "Our need for togetherness should be equal to our need for separateness. We should not be attempting to become an amorphous blob or trying so hard to join together that we squash the sense of two separate identities co-existing. If we do this we lose the basis of desire – the yearning, the vulnerability, the 'risk'. Of course with too much distance, desire flounders as it needs the pull and dance, it needs the yearning to be satiated occasionally. But without any degree of separateness, desire also flounders – the push and the pull becomes a static way of being, the energy dwindles and flickers.

"When we lose the mystery and the enchantment of discovering and enjoying a distinct 'other', we become complacent – not simply safe, we actually become stuck. When people become fused, they don't actually become a more connected couple, as there is no one to connect with – they have merged into one from two. Thus separateness is a precondition for connection: this is the essential paradox of intimacy and sex – we need to maintain our separateness as dance partners rather than fusing simply into being the music."

Achieving security and closeness

Sex may fade in couples who love each other and they can lose their desire – so what is the dynamic between love and desire? Can we want what we already have? Why doesn't good intimacy guarantee good sex? Perel asks all these questions, and is also famous for enquiring why it is that sex makes babies, yet babies often spell erotic disaster between couples. And is it possible to achieve both love and desire when we crave security and closeness?

Security does not have to mean possession, and safety does not have to mean ownership. It's vital we continue to have outside interests and outside friends; it's also important that we continue to try to grow as individuals. Dr McClymont explains, "In this way our partner still gets the opportunity to 'meet' us, to 'dance' with us. As we grow in our states of being and move through different ages and life experiences, we offer our dance partner entirely new steps to learn with us. Take up new hobbies, new pursuits, new studies and tell your partner about them. Let them enjoy you enjoying something outside of them. Equally, fake an interest in your partner's outside ideas and pursuits.

"Have outside friends, utilise your close friendships for other ways to express and maintain intimate connection. This is actually incredibly healthy – your partner does not have to provide the entirety of your emotional security. It's better for the relationship if this need can be shared. Look for and explore new ways you might be sexually expressive with each other, or find new ways to 'date' each other. Make your dates special, and dress up just as you would have done in the early stages of your relationship. Find new ways to 'discover' each other, regardless of if you have been dancing together for two weeks or 25 years!"

Reconciling love and desire

These two needs come from different places and flow in different directions. The challenge, Perel states in her book, is for »

> "YOUR PARTNER DOES NOT HAVE TO PROVIDE THE ENTIRETY OF YOUR EMOTIONAL SECURITY"

EXPLORING YOUR RIVER
SEPARATENESS VERSUS TOGETHERNESS

Ultimately when assessing to what degree you have the right level of autonomy over fusion in your relationship, it's about noticing, in any given context, whether you are truly happy in these situations and if your needs are being met. Ask yourself some questions, such as:

Do I really feel this way too?

What would happen if I said how I really feel?

Do I feel safe enough to speak my truth, and if not, why not?

Pause, and ask yourself: is this mine or yours?

Where am I in all of this?

This is where awareness and perhaps some mindfulness can be helpful. Develop a sense of knowing yourself, your needs and your boundaries, and take stock of situations where you feel a bit 'swept away'. Instead, ensure your river runs far and wide, and allow it to merge with other rivers for those beautiful and beneficial moments of connection, before you branch off again into your own depths.

drawn to each other – not sexually, just drawn to one another. Her findings were universal and the majority of the responses were gender neutral. After couples had been apart, the partner felt most drawn to their other half when: they made them laugh; they surprised them; after a fight; when they were doing something they were passionate about; when they were in their own element; when they were in the garden; when they were fixing things; when they were on stage giving a talk; and when one (of both) were slightly jealous.

What is notable here is that the findings didn't show that attraction was felt when gazing into one another's eyes. It's when we look at our partner at a comfortable distance, somewhat mysterious and unknown and in that space is the erotic potential. It's important to feel comfortable with your other half doing these things. Interestingly, she also found that none of the responses were about 'care taking' – in this realm of desire there is no 'need', it's the fact the other is an independent separate person in that moment that allows you to want them. However, what is essential is that the more connected and held and safe you feel, the more able you are to express yourself.

A mature kind of love

Another viewpoint comes from clinical psychologist Dr Sarah Bishop. She says, "The concept of our conflicting desires for closeness and separateness has been

the modern couple is to reconcile these differences, to find lust in the marriage bed and to bring the erotic and domestic in the same place. The person we want to feel safe with is also the person that we want to feel as though we can be unpredictable with.

So how are you ever supposed to navigate that tension? Perel compares this task to secure attachment. It is the same as when a child makes the decision to get up from their cosy seat one day, to move about and explore everything around them. If that child has a secure base and knows they can return whenever they want to, they will feel secure enough to make the leap to explore the world. Similarly, in erotic relationships you need freedom and some degree of self-consciousness – you want to feel as though you have the freedom and adventure but also know that you can return back safely to your other.

Fire needs air: why we need separateness in order to have connection

Perel reveals one simple formula to explain the separate/connected relationship – fire needs air. Many times people don't give one another enough space to maintain that air. Fire needs otherness and distance and movement.

In Perel's research, she asked couples to consider when they found themselves most

> "YOU WANT TO FEEL AS THOUGH YOU HAVE THE FREEDOM AND ADVENTURE BUT ALSO KNOW YOU CAN RETURN SAFELY TO YOUR OTHER"

DID YOU KNOW...
'WORK CHATS' ARE GOOD FOR COUPLES

A recent study reveals how sharing experiences about work can encourage balance in dual-earner couples and shape relationship and life satisfaction. The 2022 study from the West University of Timisoara in Romania* reveals how sharing details about your work with your partner can help them better understand and support you, and provide an opportunity to connect and bond over shared interests and experiences. They also found that couples who communicate openly and honestly about their work are more likely to have higher levels of relationship satisfaction and balance.

KEY STEPS TO SEXUALITY & INTIMACY

By US-based attorney and clinical psychologist Dr Lisa Strohman

Couple sexuality and intimacy is multi-dimensional, multi-casual and complex by its very nature. There is no right way to be intimate as this is a personal journey, less about performance and outcome and more about sharing the exquisite feelings of security, trust and mutual sexual satisfaction each time with your soul mate. As Esther Perel's theory states, there is a conflicting need for separateness and togetherness to achieve connection. Therefore, most couples' therapy focuses less on the outcome and more on building desire, pleasure, eroticism and satisfaction, to create empowered and motivated sexual partners.

There are several steps that can help in this regard:

COMMUNICATE OPENLY AND HONESTLY

Good communication is key to a healthy relationship. Talk to your partner about your desires, fantasies and expectations. Share your likes and dislikes, and be willing to listen and understand their perspective as well. This can help you both to create a more fulfilling and satisfying sexual experience.

PRIORITISE INTIMACY

Make time for intimacy in your relationship, whether it's through physical touch, sexual activity or simply spending time together. Schedule regular date nights or weekends away to keep the spark alive.

EXPERIMENT WITH NEW THINGS

Don't be afraid to try new things in the bedroom. Be adventurous and willing to explore each other's bodies and desires. This can help keep things exciting and prevent the relationship from becoming stagnant.

EMBRACE SELF-CARE

Take care of yourself physically, mentally and emotionally. When you feel good about yourself, you're more likely to feel confident and desirable, which can translate into a more satisfying sexual experience.

KEEP THE ROMANCE ALIVE

Keep the romance alive in your relationship by doing little things for each other, like leaving notes, sending thoughtful messages, or planning surprises. This can help you both to feel valued and appreciated, which can lead to a more passionate and satisfying relationship.

long recognised by psychoanalysts and philosophers. Erich Fromm, in his 1956 book *The Art of Loving*, refers to an immature love being like a completely dependent, 'symbiotic' relationship. This might be compared to a parent and infant; there is absolute closeness and recognition of every need; fuelled by a fear of the risk of what separation could cause. Of course this is a tempting fantasy, that our every need would be automatically recognised by the other but in submitting to this dynamic, there is a risk that we lose integrity due to the dependence it creates.

"In contrast with this is a 'mature love', in which both partners respect the integrity of the other and retain the individual self, instead of what Perel would call 'fusing' into one another. In mature love, both partners can come together to create a union yet they remain individual people within that union. This contrasts with immature love, where both partners are expected to surrender features of personality to blend into a dual being. A true connection therefore cannot be possible as half of the party has been swallowed by the other; how therefore can a meaningful connection exist?"

The paradox of mature love

Becoming one through love but remaining two is the paradox of mature love. Couples with a high level of respect for each other tend to find the balance between closeness and separateness more easily. In order to truly respect another individual, however, we need to acknowledge that we all have important basic needs and fears; yet due to our attachment styles these play out differently.

Dr Bishop adds, "Practise accepting that different styles within relationships are normal, and develop a curiosity and care towards this in terms of your own patterns and those of your partner. Steer away from judgement and criticism and towards understanding; every time we criticise we slip into an immature love where we are no longer viewing our partner as a unique individual."

She concludes: "We need to commit to being open to giving and receiving feedback on our relationship in a non-shaming way, and recognise that feeling vulnerable is a vital part of the process of transitioning from an immature state of 'falling in love' (which is not sustainable) to a mature love characterised by the flow of separateness and togetherness. Being more connected with you; learning about your patterns, being yourself and pursuing your individuality whilst simultaneously sharing this with openness to your partner can create a connection in which you feel deeply understood and cared for."

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*Couples and Work by West University of Timisoara in Romania: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12144-022-02747-2

COULD Sex Therapy HELP YOU?

Seeking advice for sexual issues is no longer taboo – here's why everyone should consider seeing a sex therapist

WORDS FAYE M SMITH

Around 28% of Brits have seen a counsellor or psychotherapist, a survey by the British Association for Counselling found. But there's still a type that many of us find scary or intimidating. That's sex therapy – and while the thought of talking to a stranger about the most intimate parts of your life may seem terrifying, it could be a huge help. Maybe your confidence levels have plummeted, your desires have changed, or perhaps your sex life has become non-existent. Just like with any other health concern, there are professionals out there ready to listen to your worries and help you through them.

"For some people, sex is a source of great anxiety and worry," says Annabelle Knight, sex and relationship expert with sexual wellness brand Lovehoney. "Sex therapy is an integrative approach to treating and eliminating underlying challenges. These concerns may be physical, such as the inability to become aroused, or they may also be psychological concerns, such as anxiety, stress, and confidence issues."

And there's no need to worry about having to strip naked. "Sex therapy is a type of talking therapy," says Annabelle. "It's designed to help individuals and couples address medical, psychological, personal or interpersonal factors impacting sexual satisfaction."

While it might not always be a magic cure, it's definitely a great starting point. "The goal »

> "FOR SOME PEOPLE, SEX IS A SOURCE OF GREAT ANXIETY AND WORRY"

WHAT IT CAN TREAT

Sex therapy can help with a number of issues. "Sexual dysfunction is common," says Annabelle. "In fact, four out of ten women and nearly a third of men report experiencing some type of sexual dysfunction during their lifetimes." These dysfunctions may include:

- Erectile dysfunction
- Loss of libido
- Lack of interest
- Premature ejaculation
- Low confidence
- Lack of response to sexual stimulus
- Inability to reach orgasm
- Excessive libido
- Inability to control sexual behaviour
- Distressing sexual thoughts
- Unwanted sexual fetishes

of sex therapy is to help people move past physical and emotional challenges to have a satisfying relationship and pleasurable sex life," says Annabelle. Here's how it works...

What happens in sex therapy?

Sex therapy sessions are actually pretty simple. "It's like any type of psychotherapy. You treat the condition by talking through your experiences, worries and feelings," says Annabelle. "Together with your sex therapist, you then work out coping mechanisms to help improve your responses in the future so that you can have a healthier sex life."

During your initial appointments, your therapist will either talk with just you or with you and your partner together. The therapist is there to guide and help you process your current challenge. And they won't ever judge you.

"They are not there to take one person's side or to help persuade anyone," says Annabelle.

"With each session, your therapist will continue to push you towards better management and acceptance of your concerns that may be leading to sexual dysfunction. All talk therapy, including sex therapy, is both a supportive and an educational environment. It's meant to provide comfort and encouragement for change. You will likely leave your therapist's office with assignments and work to do before your next appointment."

Your therapist can also refer you to a medical doctor if they suspect you have physical sexual concerns.

What you may be asked to do

Exercises for sex therapy are varied depending on who you see, says Annabelle. They can include:

Establishing mutual responsibility between partners for addressing sexual needs and concerns.

–

Providing information and education about sexual

"YOU TREAT THE CONDITION BY TALKING THROUGH YOUR EXPERIENCES, WORRIES AND FEELINGS"

function and sexual activity.

–

Being willing to change attitudes about sex.

–

Getting rid of any sexual performance anxiety.

–

Helping couples improve communication around sex and sexual techniques.

–

Reducing problematic behaviours and sex roles in the relationship.

–

Giving homework to help couples change their sexual relationship for the better.

Is it embarrassing?

First things first, you don't have to take your clothes off (unless you're looking for a specialist treatment – see below). "The sex therapist will not be having sexual relations with anyone or showing anyone how to have sex," says Annabelle. While it's natural to feel embarrassed when talking about sex to a stranger, it shouldn't last. "The stigma that sex therapy is embarrassing is out there, but it should not prevent you from receiving the help you need. First, sex is very personal, private and intimate, and so it seems like a strange thing to do – to talk with even a psychotherapist specialising in sex."

And, if you are embarrassed, keep remembering that having sex therapy will be beneficial in the long term. "The benefits of sex therapy far outweigh the initial embarrassment that you might fear," says Annabelle. "Getting help for yourself, your relationship, and your ability to enjoy sex can have a positive impact on your life."

Does a sex therapist touch you?

In rare cases, a sex therapist may touch you, but only with your permission. "Sex therapists talk with their patients to help them confront their sexual problems and improve their sex lives. But some patients need more – they need practise in the bedroom, and have no spouse or partner to turn to," says Annabelle. "For these patients, some sex therapists turn to surrogate partners – people who help patients with intimacy issues using a hands-on approach. This can include having sex with the patient."

It might sound shocking, but it could be a lifeline some people need. "Although use of surrogate partners is rare among patients of both genders, they are increasingly being used by women whose physical or mental health problems prevent them from enjoying a healthy sex life, experts say. In the past, such therapy was employed almost exclusively by men," adds Annabelle.

"IF YOU ARE EMBARRASSED, KEEP REMEMBERING THAT HAVING SEX THERAPY WILL BE BENEFICIAL IN THE LONG TERM"

Going solo

If your partner is refusing to see a sex therapist, that's okay. "You do not have to bring your partner with you to sex therapy. For some individuals, solo sex therapy is adequate to address concerns. For others, having both people present during therapy may help improve satisfaction and build a stronger connection," says Annabelle. "Talk with your partner about your choice to begin therapy. If you would like them to be involved, ask."

Where to go

Think a sex therapist could help you? Going to someone experienced and reputable is essential. "A certified sex therapist can be a licensed psychiatrist, psychologist, marriage and family therapist, or clinical social worker," says Annabelle. "These mental health experts undergo extensive additional training in human sexuality in order to be accredited as a certified sex therapist."

Consulting your doctor can be a great first step, because they might have sex therapists whom they value.

And, if you find you don't connect with your therapist, feel free to go elsewhere. "Therapists are unique," says Annabelle. "Successful therapy depends largely on how well you communicate with your therapist and how much you trust them and their guidance to help you through your concerns. If you don't feel comfortable with a sex therapist at any point, look for another." ■

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LIVING IN THE Shadows

Here we look at the psychological impact of competing with your other half's ex-partner and ways you can step out of the shadows and into your light

WORDS LEAH LARWOOD

Have you ever had a relationship – or maybe you're in one currently – where your partner still adores his or her ex? Perhaps the signs are indirect. The occasional memory recalled with such fondness; photographs or poignant gifts still a focal point in their home; or possibly it's more subtle than that – a seemingly innocent comparison dropped into conversation now and then. So what might be some of the drivers underlying this kind of scenario?

Arguably there could be a few different configurations that lead to an instance such as this. One possibility is that your partner hasn't fully grieved or let go of their ex and is still holding onto some unfinished business.

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THE FLIP SIDE

Thinking fondly about an ex isn't always problematic. A recent study (2023) by the University of Kansas, US, asked volunteers to think about nostalgic memories with an ex-partner. Participants who were able to do this showed an increase in satisfaction in their current relationship, and more motivation to stick with their relationship. How so? Apparently the volunteers felt that thinking of their ex fondly showed them how much they'd grown since their former relationship. Individuals who reported an increase in relationship satisfaction also stated that they'd grown since their past relationship. Researchers believe this is because this feeling increased their appreciation of their current partner.

Alternatively, perhaps the situation is congruent and there might be some of your own process and history playing out in how you experience these encounters. Arguably, the most likely possibility is that the situation is co-created in some way – a combination of your partner's unfinished business and some of your own anxieties or past experiences creating this uncomfortable situation.

The psychological effect

Regardless, the impact of 'living in the shadows' can feel very unsettling, leading to feelings of insecurity and feeling like an outsider. Ultimately, it can create a divide and prevent rich contact between two people. Alexis Friedlander is a relationship counsellor and hypnotherapist specialising in coaching people through traumatic break-ups. He explains, "Competing with an ex-partner can have a significant impact »

> “THE IMPACT OF ‘LIVING IN THE SHADOWS’ CAN FEEL VERY UNSETTLING, LEADING TO FEELINGS OF INSECURITY AND FEELING LIKE AN OUTSIDER”

5 TIPS ON HOW TO COMMUNICATE YOUR FEELINGS TO YOUR PARTNER

Alexis Friedlander's advice on understanding your emotions...

1. ASSESS

Ask yourself whether you are actually living in the shadows of your partner's ex or whether this is just a fear you have. Does your partner or their family make you feel like you are living in the shadow of the ex? If not, then it's important to work on addressing your own internal fears and insecurities.

2. COMMUNICATE

Speak to your partner about how you feel. Be honest about how you feel, but also be clear about what you need from your partner in order to feel more secure in the relationship.

3. SET BOUNDARIES

Be clear with your partner's ex, if they are still a significant part of your partner's life. This could mean asking your partner to limit their interactions with their ex or making it clear that you are not comfortable with certain types of interactions.

4. PRACTISE ACCEPTANCE

Accept that your partner's ex is still a part of their life; it's important to accept that and learn to be okay with it. This doesn't mean you have to be best friends with the ex, but it does mean being willing to interact with them in a respectful and cordial way when necessary.

5. BUILD SELF-WORTH

Focus on building your own self-confidence and sense of self-worth. Remember that your worth is not determined by your relationship status or how you compare to your partner's ex, but by your own unique qualities and strengths.

on an individual's psychological wellbeing, as it can trigger a range of negative emotions and experiences. When a person feels like they are in competition with their partner's ex, they may experience feelings of inadequacy, insecurity and low self-esteem."

Attachment styles in relationships

Alexis also believes the impact on the individual may depend on whether the person has an anxious or an avoidant attachment style. In psychological terms, attachment is how we 'attach' and relate to others we have a relationship with. Attachment theory identifies four core types of attachment styles: secure, anxious-ambivalent, disorganised and avoidant.

Alexis said, "Anxious individuals may feel intense insecurity and self-doubt when they perceive their partner to still be attached to their ex. They may constantly seek reassurance and validation from their partner, and may try to please their partner in hopes of competing with the ex. This can lead to a cycle of neediness and clinginess, which may further push their partner away."

However, 'avoidant' individuals may react by pulling away or avoiding the situation altogether. They may become distant, aloof or even dismissive when confronted with their partner's attachment to their ex, which can lead to feelings of neglect and abandonment in their current partner. Alexis adds, "In both cases, living in the shadow of an ex can trigger deep-seated attachment fears and insecurities, which can have a negative impact on the current relationship."

"When we become the 'rebound' in a new relationship, we may start to feel like we are living in a recycled version of the previous relationship. This can happen because the person who is rebounding may be unconsciously trying to recreate the same dynamic with us as they had with their ex. It can be challenging to navigate this situation and to ensure that we are not being treated as a replacement or a stand-in for their previous partner. It's something I see a lot in rebound relationships – people go to the same places, keep the same rituals. Remember, your partner chose you for a reason, and their ex is a part of their past, not their present or future."

So where can you begin to unpick a potentially complex situation involving an ex? As a starting point, there are two things to consider in a situation like this – 'awareness' and 'communication'. This means having some awareness of your emotional responses and what history you might be bringing to the situation, while also observing the process of your partner and other parties involved, too. It's then a case of being clear in expressing your feelings and communicating your needs to ensure that you and your partner can have an open and honest dialogue to find a way forward.

Q&A

DR AUDREY TANG

Dr Audrey Tang is a BPS chartered psychologist, award-winning business author, and leadership development trainer.

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Here we ask Dr Audrey Tang her views about what it might mean to feel as though you are 'living in the shadows' of an ex.

How can you overcome 'living in the shadows' of an ex?

A state of comparison to fuel our self-esteem and to feel validation has been programmed into us through being part of a community, sometimes because resources are scarce

> REMEMBER, YOUR PARTNER CHOSE YOU FOR A REASON

– so the 'best' wins. When it comes to love and validation, if we are able to give it to ourselves, the source is infinite – there's no scarcity. Therefore, there's no need to feel you are losing out. Further, in building our character, a focus on self-compassion is important – for example, saying 'I didn't win, but I'm proud I actually showed up as I could easily have sacked it off' – building ourselves up with our only 'competition' being that we are perhaps that little bit better today than we were yesterday.

What happens if your partner's parents still adore the ex?

Each partner is likely to have formed a different type of relationship with the in-laws, and in the same way as all our friendships are different depending on the people involved – it might be that simply our partner's parents got on better with their ex. The main thing is, our partner did not. This question is more about how your partner makes you feel rather than the family.

It is unfortunate, it isn't pleasant, and it might even be deliberately mean if the family is constantly bringing up comparisons which do not favour you. In the first instance, the act of comparison speaks to someone's own values. The healthiest approach to self-value is self-compassion not self-esteem (through comparison), but you are nonetheless also not dating the family. If, however, your partner is keen to support them, or their behaviours turn into little personal passive-aggressive digs at you, then you may need to consider whether that person themselves is worth your time and energy.

What happens when you're competing with the memory of a deceased partner?

What may be happening – and it may only be time and processing that will make the difference – is that the partner may not have processed their grief, or be in a state of 'what if', which still speaks to not having processed what they have been through. Either way, this would suggest that they are not ready to be in a new relationship yet. As difficult as this may be to hear, you may need to decide whether you want to be with someone who isn't giving, and may never give you their breadth of love, or if you need to give yourself the opportunity to be wholly happy.

What advice do you have on managing our feelings in complicated emotional situations?

Work out what it is you are feeling. If you are feeling fear, for example, ask yourself where the fear is coming from – perhaps it is jealousy or a lack of self-value. Already you will see that both would necessitate different solutions. The 'Feelings Wheel' by Dr Gloria Willcox is a lovely tool to begin to explore beyond the emotional top line.

If you are feeling envious then try this: instead, write up a list of the things you feel envious of, and note down the things that you observe as making that person so accomplished, and if you want to develop them either:
a) Try to practise those behaviours and see which ones work for you
b) Ask them how they developed those traits. Often when we approach someone with love and curiosity (rather than dismissal or disdain) they actually want to help us and if they don't, then maybe you didn't want to be so like them after all!

TRY ROSALIND WISEMAN'S SEAL TECHNIQUE

A helpful tool for dealing with conflict

S – STOP Take a step back from the emotion of the situation.

E – EXPLAIN Why you feel as you do and why did what happened take place? What you would have preferred to happen?

A – AFFIRM / ACKNOWLEDGE Validate the right to feel those emotions, and also acknowledge how all the parties involved may be feeling. What role can you play in making the situation better?

L – LOCK IN / OUT This can be decided after the first three steps. How do you want the relationship or situation to progress? If it's 'locking in' then you need to find a way to resolve it. Alternatively, 'locking out' can allow you to find a way to move on and without regret or holding a grudge.

LOCKING OUT If you have tried to solve the issues and it simply isn't happening or you find that the situation is too toxic, then perhaps try the following first, but if not, then it is time to 'lock out' the relationship. For example, you may need to state a consequence (also one negotiated with your partner), such as, 'If you continue to compare me to X I won't come round here anymore', and be willing to follow through. With this you might be able to open a negotiation and ask, 'So, how can we resolve this?'

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Counteracting COERCIVE CONTROL

How to spot the signs of coercive behaviour and how to escape its isolating grasp

WORDS SCOTT DUTFIELD

Domestic abuse presents itself in many different forms, from the blatant brutality of physical violence to the cloak-and-dagger mind games of mental torture. Coercive control runs the fine line between the two. Simply put, coercive control is often defined as a pattern of controlling behaviour intended to psychologically control, and often leads to the physical weakening of someone in an intimate relationship, such as a spouse or family member.

Coercive control is used as a psychological tactic employed by a close persecutor to undermine others' self-worth and restricts the autonomy of a person's life. The outcome of such abuse is a subdued victim entangled in the belief that their abuser is their entire support system.

Due to the many branches of abusive behaviour that creates the overall tree of coercive control, the psychology tactic has long been difficult to define and understand. The term 'coercive control' was first proposed by sociologist and forensic social worker Evan Stark, when he published his seminal work on the concept, *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*, in 2007. Stark explores the genesis of coercive control on a social level, suggesting that as society's institutional control of women over time became socially unacceptable, controlling behaviour instead transferred into the home, tucked away from view.

While hidden behind closed doors, this type of control can fester and spore fruits of self-doubt and a loosening on a person's grip of reality. Stark argues that although coercive control is a form of abuse, rather than exclusively a crime of violence, it seeks to strip away the victim's liberty and freedom.

The signs and symptoms of coercive control

The foundations on which coercive control is built is isolation. By restricting another person's connection with friends and family,

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COERCION

Domestic abuse doesn't discriminate when it comes to gender, however women are disproportionately impacted when compared to men. For example, in the UK, around 73% of all domestic abuse-related crimes were committed against women. In 2020, 97% of those convicted of coercive control were men, according to Women's Aid. However, there is a distinct lack of research surrounding the impact and abundance of coercive control amongst male victims, as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community.

A study conducted by the University of Central Lancashire investigated the scope of coercive control amongst men. The study revealed that in many cases, men in similar domestically abusive relationships experienced comparable levels of coercive behaviour in several areas of coercion by female abusers, such as intimidation, isolation and economic control. Due to males being the predominant perpetrators of coercive control, the study explains that "false allegations, or the threat of making these, to the police and social services as a pattern of abuse are experienced by almost two thirds of male victims in our survey." The study authors acknowledge the need for large-scale national studies to better understand the scale and scope of coercive control in male victims.

> GASLIGHTING IS ONE OF THE MOST INSIDIOUS FORMS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MANIPULATION AND COERCIVE CONTROL

the perpetrator strips away their victim's potential support system. This not only limits the chance of a perpetrator's coercive behaviour being discovered by someone outside of the relationship, but it also begins to build a psychological barrier around their victim in which the abuser gains control over many aspects of their lives.

Signs of coercive behaviour centre around surveillance and reinforcing an idea that the victim is worthless, and that without the perpetrator they couldn't survive or navigate through life. According to the domestic abuse charity Women's Aid, those who experience coercive control can be controlled in all aspects of everyday life, including where they go, what they wear and even when they sleep. Control can extend to diet, medicine and financial restrictions, leading the victim to become completely dependent on their abuser. Controlling behaviour is often accompanied with repeatedly putting the victim down, humiliating and dehumanising them.

One of the most common acts of manipulation under the umbrella of coercive control is the concept of gas lighting. The term 'gas lighting' originates from the title of a stage play in the early 1900s, which was later adapted in the well-known movie in 1944 by the same name. In the movie *Gaslight*, the protagonist Paula meets and marries a man in Italy before jetting back to London. However, Paula's new husband, Gregory, embarks on a relentless and surreptitious scheme to convince his wife she is losing her mind. Lie after lie, Paula retreats further into herself and begins to believe Gregory, becoming increasingly dependent on her husband for care and reassurance.

The name of the film comes from Gregory using gas in a locked-off room where he is committing crimes, which causes gas lanterns in the rest of the house to flicker. Gregory convinces Paula that she is imagining the flickering, leading her to question her sanity, which is one of the main characteristics of this form of abusive behaviour. Although Paula and Gregory's relationship is a work of make-believe, the central behaviour in the movie is far from fiction.

Gaslighting is one of the most insidious forms of psychological manipulation and coercive control due to its ability to make the victim feel as though they are the problem. Over time, a 'gaslighter' will manipulate their victim by withholding information, challenging their memory, trivialising the victim's feelings or ignoring them altogether. Perpetrators of gaslighting are typically pathological liars, often with narcissistic tendencies, who will spread malicious rumours about a person's mental state, often issuing concern to others to further perpetuate the false concept that a victim is unstable. Over an extended period of time, this form of manipulation will cause their victim to question the validity of their own thoughts and feelings, typically leading them to being confused and compromising their mental stability.

One of the ways that coercive control can cross the line from mental abuse into physical is through sexual coercion. This type of coercion involves unwanted sexual activity by pressurising, tricking or threatening a »

person through non-physical means. For example, perpetrators may make a victim feel they owe that person sex, or will threaten to spread lies about their victim if they don't have sex with them. This type of coercion extends to people in power over others, such as a boss, teacher or landlord, who have the authority to influence aspects of a victim's life to pressure them into sleeping with them.

In 1956, an American psychologist called Albert Biderman outlined the methods used by the Chinese during the Korean War to 'brainwash' American prisoners of war to elicit false confessions. Biderman created a chart of coercion that described eight tactics employed by the captors to coerce prisoners. This included isolation, deliberate exhaustion, degradation, threats, enforcing trivial demands, displays of power, occasional indulgences and, finally, distorted perspectives. Biderman proffered that the same tactic of coercion used during the war are the same utilised by perpetrators of domestic abuse.

Biderman also listed "monopolisation of perception" as another coercive technique, whereby a perpetrator will attempt to alter the views of their victim, punish actions of resistance and place the blame onto their victim.

Signs of coercive control aren't limited to verbal degradation that impact a person's mental health. Perpetrators may also "induce debilitation and exhaustion" according to Biderman's chart. By depriving their victim of sleep, food and even medicine, their victims are less likely to resist their control and continue their coercion.

Coercive control and the law

Historically, cases of domestic abuse have been largely characterised by physical and sexual assaults. However, within the last decade, laws around the world are changing to reflect the wider range of abusive behaviours that a victim may be subjected to, including mental abuse, as well as coercive control.

England and Wales were the first countries in the world to make controlling behaviour, such as coercive control, illegal back in 2015. Under the Serious Crime Act 2015, those convicted of coercive control are punishable by up to five years in prison. "Controlling or coercive behaviour is an insidious form of domestic abuse and this Government is committed to ensuring all victims are protected. We recognise that coercive or controlling behaviours may escalate following separation, and that members of a victim's extended family may be involved in control or coercion," Victoria Atkins, former Minister for Safeguarding, wrote in a 2021 ministerial statement. However, also in 2021 a review into the 2015 law revealed that although the number of recorded coercive control offences had increased, police only charged perpetrators in 6% of reported cases between 2018 and 2019. Of those that were charged, the conviction rate was 52%.

Since England and Wales introduced their law protections, some other European countries have followed suit, including France, the Republic of Ireland and Portugal. The Council of Europe convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, better known as the Istanbul Convention, was signed by 39 European states and ratified by 21 with the intent of protecting victims of domestic abuse. However, only six of those ratified countries have complied with the part of the treaty that addresses psychological violence, called Article 33, which states,"Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of seriously impairing a person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats is criminalised."

The only other countries to enact legal protection against coercive control outside of Europe are the United States and Canada. At the time of writing, three US states have adopted legal protections against coercive control and five states have protective bills currently pending. In 2020, a bill was passed in California that expands the power of the Domestic Violence Prevention Act to include coercive control. In the bill, coercive control is defined as "a pattern of behaviour that unreasonably interferes with a person's free will and personal liberty and includes, among other things, unreasonably isolating a victim from friends, relatives, or other sources of support." Hawaii also enacted laws in 2020 to protect against coercive control, and Connecticut followed suit in 2021.

Queensland in Australia is set to pass laws on coercive control by the end of 2023.

> "SIGNS OF COERCIVE CONTROL AREN'T LIMITED TO VERBAL DEGRADATION"

5 SIGNS OF COERCIVE CONTROL

MICROMANAGEMENT

Abusers will restrict access to aspects of a person's life, such as finances, social contact and even medical support. Micromanagement can even extend to when and where you attend school or work.

MONITORING

Abusers tend to monitor a victim's time and communication with others by reading text messages and emails. Some perpetrators will install spyware software on their victims' computers to remotely stalk their actions online.

DENIAL

When confronted, the abuser will shift the blame onto the victim for causing the abuse or simply deny it ever happened. Alternatively, a perpetrator might acknowledge what's happened but insist they have a problem.

THREATS AND CRITICISM

Verbal intimidation and threats of physical violence are tactics used to control victims, along with unrelenting criticism, name calling and pointing out their mistakes.

ISOLATION

Coercive behaviour typically involves isolating a person from seeing their friends and family. Victims will often spend more time in their homes and not be allowed out to social events.

Escaping control

The nature of coercive control makes it a difficult form of domestic abuse to break away from, especially as it can occur within many kinds of relationships. For example, coercion isn't limited to just romantic partners, and can occur between family members, friends and colleagues. Breaking these various chains of coercion can be complex, especially when additional factors like children are involved.

Building a support system is essential when it comes to breaking free from a controlling relationship. Depending on the length of the relationship and the level of isolation a victim has succumbed to, this might feel like an impossible task, but mending lost relationships and rebuilding connections can help you to construct a long-term plan for the future.

Putting together a post-break up plan before exiting a relationship will also allow victims to take back control of the many aspects of their lives – it is preparation for their rediscovered independence. Plans should include living arrangements – both a short-term solution after leaving, and legally requesting an abusive partner vacate a property – as well as any required financial steps.

Seeking help from domestic abuse charities or national hotlines can be a great way to gather local resources and information about how to escape from an abusive relationship. However, information from online browsing history or telephone call history should be erased from devices to prevent being seen by an abusive perpetrator. Victims of abuse should consider using public means of communication, such as library computers or public telephones.

When dealing with coercive control outside of an intimate relationship, such as in the workplace, victims should consider documenting every event in which a perpetrator is using manipulative tactics like sexual advances, gaslighting and humiliation. Keep a record of abusive correspondence, such as emails, voice messages and notes. Gathered information can then be taken to your company's human resources department, who are responsible for ensuring workplace safety and tackling harassment and abuse.

In domestic abuse cases, if a victim is seeking the prosecution of their abuser, then documentation can be key to their conviction.

Before making any attempt to leave an abusive relationship, it's important to first assess the victim's safety and to be acquainted with the relevant laws. Ending a controlling relationship can be as simple as an uncomfortable conversation, but others may escalate into physical violence. If a victim feels unsure and the relationship has become dangerous, they should avoid an in-person confrontation and leave the situation as a matter of urgency. When confronting a coercive partner, it may help the victim to have another person from their support system in attendance.

Coercive perpetrators may continue to gaslight a victim during the separation in an attempt to reinforce the idea that they're not abusive and the evidence for such is just in the minds of their victims. Persistent apologies and declarations of willingness to change is also a tactic used to coerce a person back into their controlling grasp. Therefore, a victim might consider writing a plan for an in-person separation, stick to the points outlined in the plan and stay strong when challenged. However, if the separation isn't accepted by an abusive partner or family member and a victim is harassed or stalked, then they might consider seeking legal action, such as a personal protection order or restraining order. ■

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What is GASLIGHTING?

Gaslighting is psychological manipulation to make you doubt everything about yourself – and it can be horribly effective

WORDS EDOARDO ALBERT

It's a long time since gas lights lit our homes, so it might seem strange that this most modern of psychological power plays is named after a defunct form of illumination. The *Oxford English Dictionary* named 'gaslighting' as one of its words of 2018; it's only in the last few years that it has entered the mainstream as a technique of psychological manipulation.

The word itself comes from Patrick Hamilton's 1938 play, *Gas Light*, and the films based on the play released in 1940 and 1944, both called *Gaslight*. In the play and films, a husband causes his devoted wife to doubt her own sanity by secretly turning down their home's gas lights while denying her perception that the light is changing. The term was adopted in psychoanalytic thought in the 1970s but only really came to prominence a few years ago along with concerns about 'fake news'. It has been seized upon since then because it describes a range of manipulative behaviours that it would be otherwise hard to label.

Gaslighting occurs in relationships where there is an imbalance of power. It is most common in romantic relationships but it can occur in a wide variety of other relationships, from parent and child through to boss and employee right up to the level of the state and the citizen. Gaslighting is not some inborn or genetically predisposed condition but rather it is a set of behaviours that are learned and then used. The gaslighter, by denying the other person's perceptions, feelings and opinions, systematically undermines their self-worth and, ultimately, can make them doubt their sanity. Gaslighting is a method to exert control and power in a relationship but it is not, in itself, a psychological disorder. However, as a technique of control it is often employed by people with narcissistic personality disorder. Typical ploys in the gaslighting playbook include:

Denying
The gaslighter flatly denies doing something the other person knows they did.

Lying
Gaslighters lie. A lot. And they are good at it. Gaslighters may also spread rumours about the other person to ramp up the psychological pressure, for instance telling family members or colleagues – confidentially of course – that the other person is suffering an emotional crisis that makes them unreliable in some way.

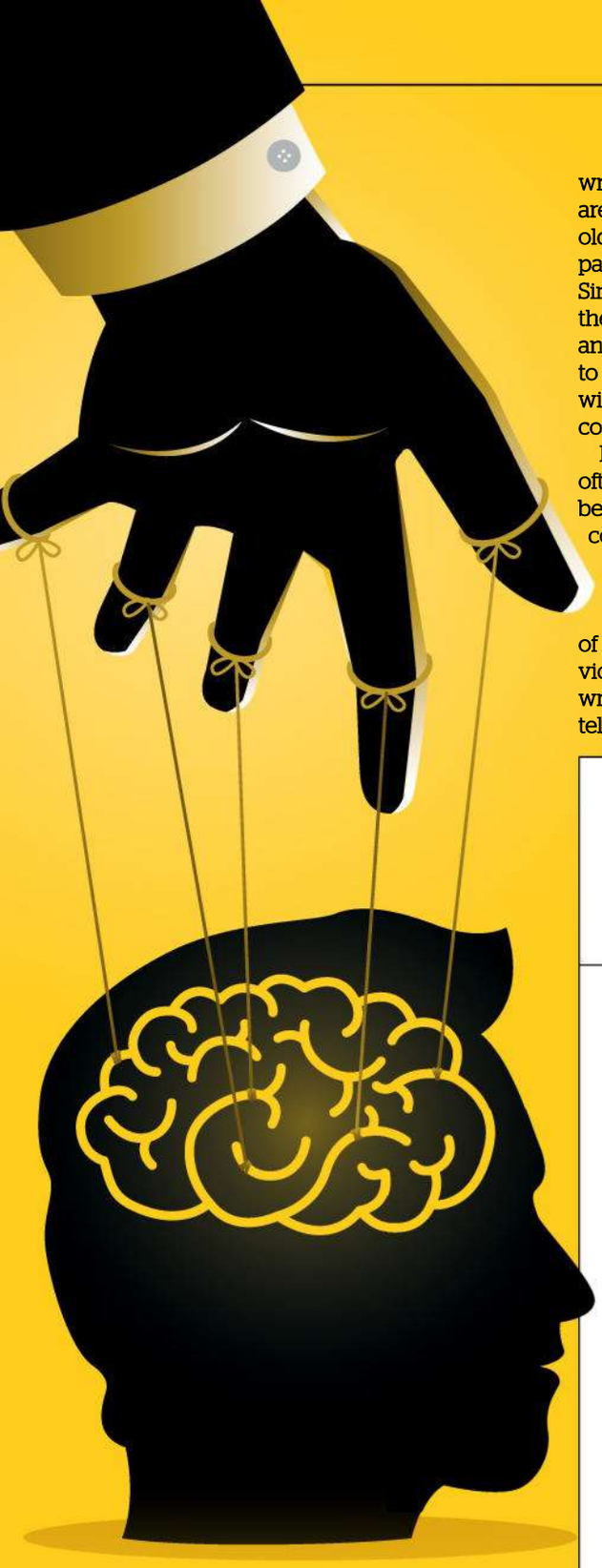
Shifting the blame
Gaslighters are skilled at changing the terms of reference of a conversation so even when the other person is trying to bring up an example of the gaslighter's bad behaviour, it always ends up that the other person is to blame.

Minimising
The other person's thoughts and feelings are, at best, trivial. A typical gaslighter response might be, "Oh, you always overreact to everything."

Diverting
If the other techniques don't work, then a gaslighter will divert the conversation on to something else.

The fundamental technique of gaslighting is to convince the victim that their perceptions and feelings are false while the gaslighter's perceptions are true. The perceptive reader may note how this technique can be scaled upwards – and indeed it has been in various totalitarian states in history. In *1984*, George Orwell provides a fictional example of a state that manipulates reported reality in such a way as to convince its citizens to doubt their own perceptions and accept those of the state. Communist propaganda, according to the writer Theodore Dalrymple, was designed not to persuade but to humiliate: everyone knew it was a lie but all the citizens had to silently accept the lies as truth or even spout the lies themselves. The government propaganda attending to the Covid-19 pandemic has also provided some excellent examples of how a state can gaslight its people. Governmental gaslighting is one of the most naked examples of the power dynamics involved in gaslighting. The gaslighter seeks to control the victim so it is particularly attractive to states seeking to control their own people.

The victim of gaslighting is not powerless, however. Although it might take the dawning realisation that something, somehow, is



wrong to realise what is going on – gaslighters are usually skilled at what they do – the old saw that knowledge is power applies particularly to relationships with gaslighters. Since a gaslighter seeks to undermine the other person's thoughts, perceptions and feelings, everything that they can do to validate those thoughts and feelings will act as armour against the gaslighter's constant assault on their self-esteem.

In domestic contexts, however, gaslighting often escalates to violence, so it might be necessary to do some of these things covertly. Keeping a secret diary allows the victim to confirm his or her own perceptions and memory of what has happened against the gaslighter's denial of them. There's nothing so affirming for the victim as being able to check back and see, written down, that the gaslighter really did tell them, for example, to fix dinner for 6pm, not 8pm. Over a period, the secret diary enables the victim of gaslighting to validate their own perception and understand the particular pattern of gaslighting that is being used against them. With knowledge comes renewed power: either to leave the abusive relationship or to confront the gaslighter with the evidence of their own bad faith. In some cases, particularly those gaslighters with narcissistic personality disorder, this will probably not achieve much. However, some gaslighters are trapped in patterns of behaviour they observed in their own parents and may be able to break out of the pattern. Whatever the outcome, the first step is for the victim to realise what is happening, to trust their own perceptions, and to take steps to distance their perceptions and feelings from the gaslighter's attempts to manipulate them. As in the film, they have to learn to believe their own eyes again. ■

WHAT GASLIGHTING FEELS LIKE

The aim of the gaslighter is to keep their victim off balance and questioning their own perceptions so it can be very difficult to tell if you are being gaslighted. But if you are experiencing some combination of these feelings, then you might be being gaslighted.

Confusion. At some level, the relationship does not make sense.

-

You realise that you are lying to family and friends in order to protect the gaslighter.

-

It becomes difficult to make even simple decisions on your own.

-

You find yourself apologising for everything, even when you know that it's not your fault.

-

You start wondering if you are too sensitive.

-

You start feeling that you are no longer the person you used to be.

-

You realise that you are becoming cut off from other relatives and friends.

These are all signs of an abusive, gaslighting relationship. If you are concerned that this might be happening to you, in the UK try contacting **Relate** (*www.relate.org.uk*). In the US contact **The Hotline** (*www.thehotline.org/1.800.799.SAFE*) and in Australia **Relationships NSW** (*www.relationshipsnsw.org.au/1800RESPECT*).

> "GASLIGHTING IS A METHOD TO EXERT CONTROL AND POWER IN A RELATIONSHIP"

© Getty Images / Treety

LIFE AFTER Betrayal

Whether you're thinking about getting back with your ex partner or you're ready to meet someone new, here's how to move forward after infidelity

WORDS ROSE GOODMAN

Feeling hurt after betrayal and not sure how to move on? You're not alone – in fact, cheating is one of the top ten reasons why couples split, with a recent survey* revealing that 46% of people in a monogamous relationship admit to having affairs, causing stress and emotional upheaval for the wounded party. Still, 24% of married couples decide to stay together, enforcing new rules for the relationship, such as sharing phone passwords, avoiding certain friends and putting limitations on going out, to minimise the likelihood of further affairs.

But, whether you want to make your relationship work, or you're thinking about leaving your partner and eventually finding someone new, the fallout after infidelity can cause you to feel lost and unsure how to move forward. Here, we ask our relationship experts how you can navigate your feelings after betrayal and find happiness again – however that might look.

Managing the aftermath

Don't rush into anything. "Give yourself time to get over whatever has come before the split, whether it's divorce or bereavement," says Barbara Bloomfield, Relate counsellor and relationship expert. "Make sure you are in a comfortable and confident enough place before looking for a partner in later life, because it can be really tricky. I suggest that after a split, you give yourself plenty of time to heal and steady yourself. Then, when you are ready, ask a trusted friend to spend a day with you, giving positive advice on your strengths and how you present yourself."

Of course, it has to be someone who really cares about you and who is positive, rather than critical. Barbara suggests you consider the following questions: How do you want to be seen by others? Which outfits make you feel good about yourself? Might a friend come and help you to repaint a bedroom or clear out a kitchen, to kick-start the process of 'New You'? "Never underestimate the power of a haircut! Also, don't forget counsellors »

> "INFIDELITY CAN CAUSE YOU TO FEEL LOST AND UNSURE HOW TO MOVE FORWARD"

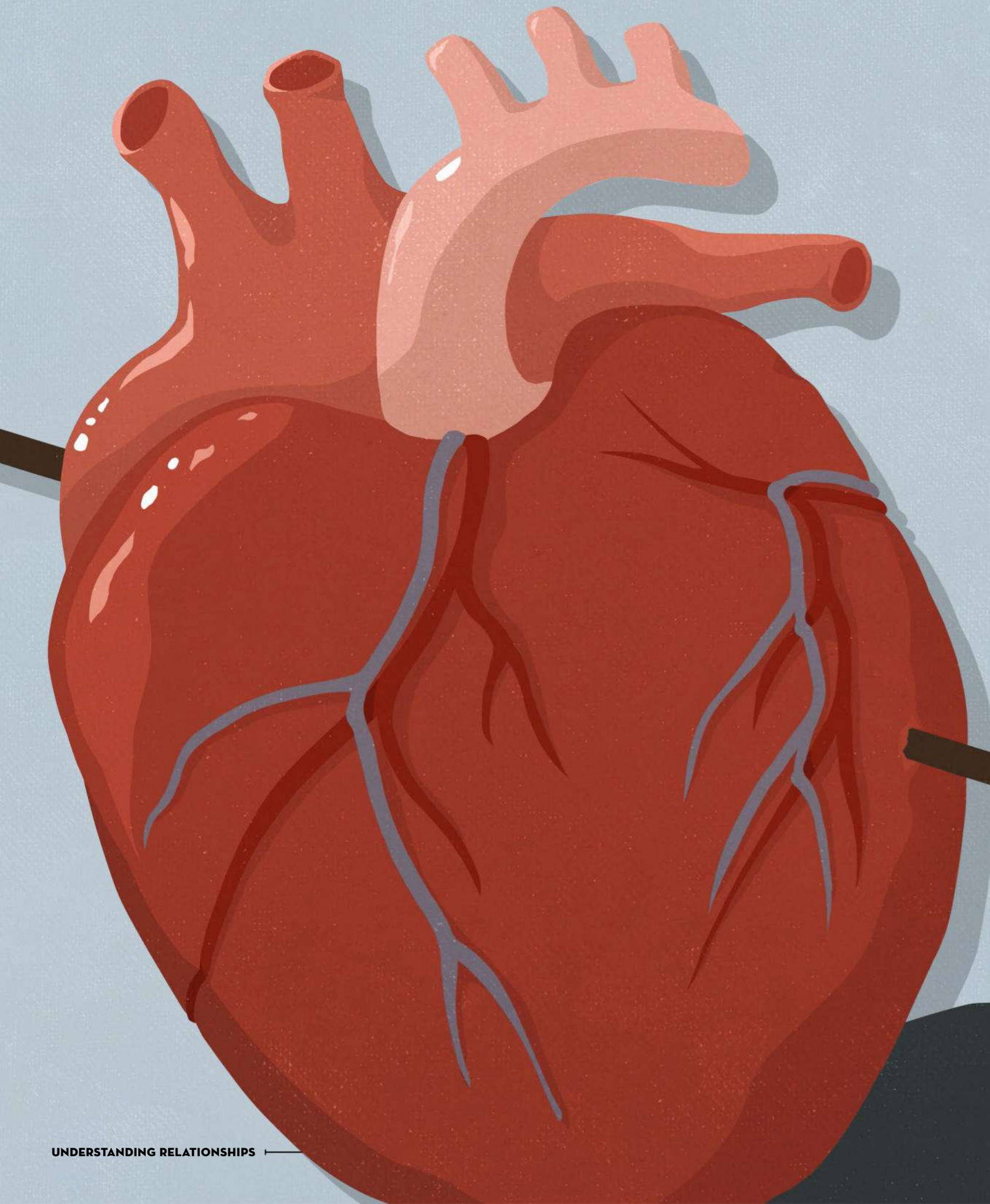
MOST COMMON REASONS FOR CHEATING

WOMEN

Feeling flattered by the attention (44%) and feeling emotionally deprived in the relationship (43%).

MEN

Flattery (35%) and dissatisfaction with their sex life (32%).**



> "DO THINGS YOU WANT TO DO, WHEN YOU WANT TO DO THEM"

are helpful to the process of building self-esteem," adds Barbara.

This is also a great time to do things you want to do, when you want to do them. "Either resuscitating an old waylaid hobby or starting one you have always wanted to try is a great way to get back to yourself," says Dr Madeleine Mason Roantree, psychologist, dating coach and director of relationship psychology services at The Vida Consultancy. "Spend time with friends, and make new memories that are just about you."

Deciding whether to leave

"As a counsellor, I see a lot of couples who have broken up because they lacked the skills to solve their problems and maybe were too embarrassed to ask for help from a counsellor," says Barbara. "What we notice at Relate is that, when separated couples take the big step to ring for an appointment, no matter how bad things have been, their desire to try to heal the split means the majority of those couples will end up reuniting."

Don't be hasty

Thinking about getting back together? Don't rush into it. "I'm a great believer in couples taking a short time apart if they can do this. It is an acknowledgement that they have been unable to resolve their differences and it's time to reflect separately and cool things down, and perhaps to see how

YOUR HEALING HANDBOOK

Follow these top tips from Eharmony's relationship expert Rachael Lloyd

ALLOW YOURSELF TO GRIEVE

"When someone cheats on you, the relationship you thought you had with them is effectively over. Your best memories with that person are tainted, as a third party has invaded your emotional space. Don't bottle things up. Even if you're raging, remember that beneath anger is grief and if you suppress it, the recovery process will be compromised."

DON'T COMPARE AND DESPAIR

"Comparing yourself to the person he or she cheated with, is pointless. Because your confidence has been hammered, you're likely to put them on a pedestal and see them as far more desirable than they really are. This isn't a competition, and what you need to focus on now is rebuilding your own sense of worth."

NEVER OBSESS ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED

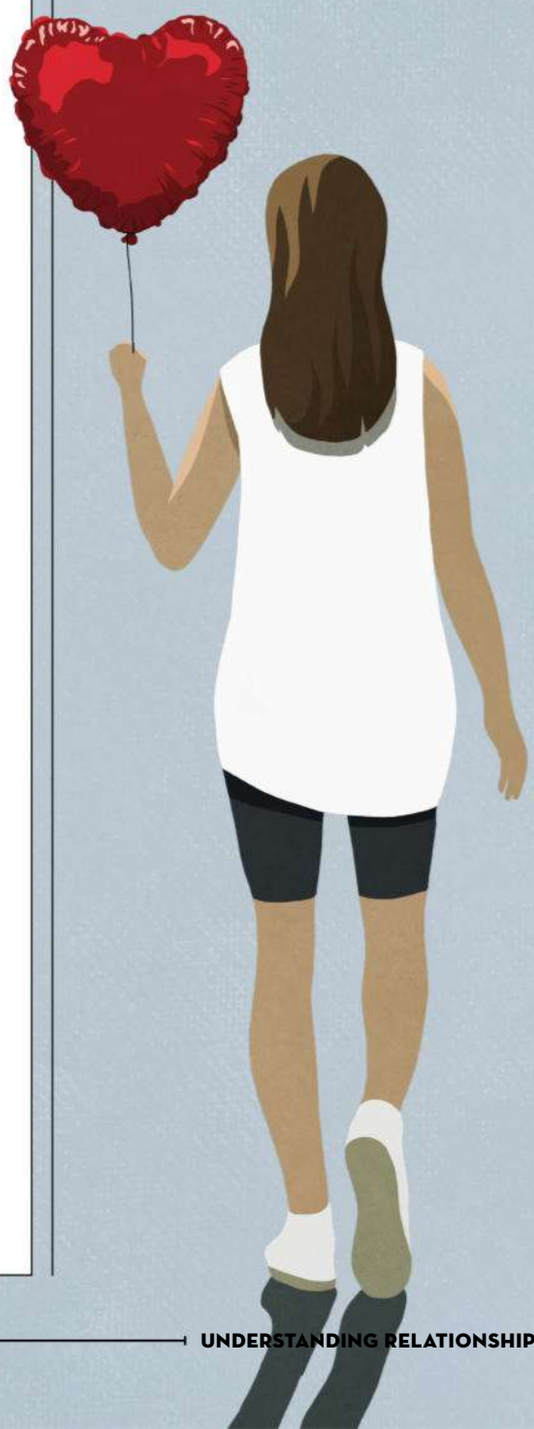
"Sometimes people who are cheated on want micro details about exactly how, when and where the cheating took place. This is often an attempt to control and manage feelings, but it usually leads to even more trapdoors opening. Step away!"

TALK IT OUT

"Lean on your support network of good friends and family and communicate whenever you need to. If you're really struggling, see a professional therapist or coach and get rock-solid back up."

HEAL YOUR BODY

"Trauma has a profound effect on our bodies as well as our minds. Therapies like EFT (emotional freedom technique), which involve tapping on specific pressure points, can be hugely transformative as can regular massage," says Rachael. Try Nick and Jessica Ortner – The Tapping Solution on YouTube. And exercise, such as Pilates, can help.



READY TO MOVE ON?

You might be wondering how you will know you're ready to hit the dating scene again but there are some subtle indicators. "You'll stop comparing new matches with your ex," says Rachael. "You'll also have worked through much of the anger, grief and baggage that is inevitable for anyone who's been cheated on. My advice is once you feel ready, ease into the dating scene gently. Approach each new date as an opportunity to meet someone new and have refreshing conversations." Take it slowly and follow these expert tips:

DO THE WORK

"You need to make sure you've worked through the most dramatic feelings related to the betrayal before leaping into something else," says Rachael. "This takes time, it's not an overnight job. I strongly recommend you see a coach or therapist if you're in any doubt about whether you're ready to move on."

BE HONEST

Once you start seeing someone new, be honest about any trust issues or lack of confidence you may be having. "Make sure the new partner knows these issues are not about them. They're historic things that you take responsibility for, and are willing to work hard at resolving," says Rachael. "As long as you try, and you show them love and kindness, you can make it work."

PUT YOURSELF OUT THERE

There are plenty of ways to meet new people depending on your preference. Whether that's through more traditional 'in real life' means via socialising, or you want to sign up to a matchmaking service that will search for you, or you find internet dating sites and apps more accessible – there's something for everyone. Intrigued? There are plenty of free dating sites out there. "The trick is to know what you are looking for," says Dr Mason Roantree. "I recommend you create a list of three to four values that are important to you, and three to four deal-breakers, and use that as your guide to meet someone compatible."

BE OPEN-MINDED

"Don't limit yourself to transient aspects such as weight, age and wealth, or superficial markers such as height and education, as they are likely to limit the pool of people you can date," adds Dr Mason Roantree. "For example, just because someone is slim or tall, doesn't make them kind, trustworthy or respectful."

FURTHER SUPPORT

For couples counselling in the UK, visit ***relate.org.uk*** or call **0300 100 1234** to find out about your local service and their fees. You can also visit ***freepsychotherapynetwork.com*** to search for a low-cost therapist in your area. If you're in the US or Australia, visit ***betterhelp.com***.

much you miss each other," says Barbara. "However, when children are involved, a physical split may not be right as it's important to put the children's needs first."

How to get over infidelity

"If you and your partner have separated due to an affair, and want to reunite, it's important to think about why the affair happened," says Barbara. "What was not working well in the relationship? And what is the status of the affair? We believe it can take up to two years to trust your partner again, after an affair has taken place."

Be careful not to fall into the trap of 'forgetting' what happened while being caught up in the thrill of reconciliation. This might feel great in the moment, but will only cause these unresolved issues to pop up in the future, and potentially cause more problems.

"Talking about what happened and trying to understand is a good basis for heading off any future repetition," says Barbara. "I suggest couples set aside ten minutes, twice a week. Make yourself comfortable, listen carefully to your partner for five minutes without saying anything, even if you don't agree. At the end of five minutes, swap and your partner will listen to you for five minutes. Don't interrupt or try to solve anything. Just listen! If you can understand their point of view, it's the greatest gift you can give your partner."

© Getty Images / Malte Mueller

*Health Testing Centers. ** YouGov survey.

CAN A HEART REALLY BE Broken?

Romantic relationships might have more of an impact on your physical health than you realise

WORDS ELEANOR VOUSDEN & ROSE GOODMAN

Have you experienced turmoil at some point over the years? You might remember feeling strong physical sensations along with deep emotions. Maybe you had a pit in your stomach or a deep ache in your chest after a break-up. While this is normal, in some cases a sudden shock or getting terrible news can also lead to a serious change in the way your heart functions. Medically called takotsubo cardiomyopathy, 'broken heart syndrome' (BHS) is experienced by about 3,000 people

in the UK each year, and nine out of ten of those affected are women. Here, our experts get to the heart of this condition.

The pain is real

Symptoms of BHS mimic those of a heart attack. "It usually occurs in people who have experienced physically and/or emotionally stressful events, such as a bereavement," says Ruth Goss, senior cardiac nurse at the British Heart Foundation. "However, in around 30% of cases there is no identifiable trigger." Research is still ongoing, but scientists believe that this stress results in a surge of adrenaline to the heart.

"This causes the left ventricle (the bottom left chamber of the heart, which is responsible for pumping blood out of the heart and around the body) to balloon and weaken suddenly," says Ruth. "It means that the heart can't pump blood around the body properly – and, in some cases, these changes can lead to other heart problems, like heart failure, for example."

BHS versus heart attack

The main difference between the two is that a heart attack is caused by a blockage in one of the coronary arteries that supply blood to the heart muscle. Patients with takotsubo syndrome don't have this blockage.

"It's only when doctors do further tests to examine the coronary arteries that they will see that there are no blockages, as there would be after a heart attack," says Ruth. "Instead, an echocardiogram (an ultrasound of the heart) will show that the heart muscle is not working properly and the left ventricle is larger than normal."

Who is affected and how?

While we may think our emotions were most volatile in our teenage years, it's actually middle-aged and older women who are diagnosed with BHS up to ten times more often than younger women or men of any age.* It's believed this is due to the female hormone oestrogen helping to protect the heart from the harmful effects of adrenaline, so women, in particular, become vulnerable to the effects of sudden stress as they age and their oestrogen levels drop.

BHS can cause so much pain, some sufferers will end up in hospital, often with a suspected heart attack. Because of the life-threatening electrical instability of the heart during the early stages of attack, many are admitted to a specialist coronary care unit for at least two days.

"There is no consensus on longer-term measures," says consultant cardiologist Dr Dana Dawson of the University of Aberdeen. "There haven't been any clinical trials yet to explore medicines that may help the heart recover better or prevent recurrence, although we're learning all the time."

Luckily, you can expect to recover from the medical effects of a wounded heart, although research reveals it may take up to four months**. This is because the strenuous movements of the heart are still impaired for months after an attack, and scarring can occur, reducing elasticity and preventing the heart from contracting properly. This partly explains the small risk of death, even years later.

Always seek immediate medical help if you experience chest pain and shortness of breath for anything from a few minutes to hours, days or weeks after severe emotional or physical stress. If you have concerns about your health, speak to your doctor.

NATURAL STRESS BUSTERS

Adopting these daily habits can help take care of your heart, and reduce your risk of Broken Heart Syndrome (BHS).

CONNECTION

Oxytocin is a calming, feel-good hormone that is released when we feel love, comfort and trust. Do you have a fluffy friend at home? Stroking your companion animal can also release this hormone***, so spend quality time with a cat or dog to melt away tension.

MINDFUL BREATHING

- Place one hand on your upper chest and one on your stomach, just below your belly.
- ***Slowly breathe out as you count to 11.***
- Pause and then breathe in to the count of seven.
- ***Repeat twice.***

Try to make sure that the hand placed on your stomach is the only part that moves. When stressed, we take shallow breaths using the top of our chests. Learn to breathe more deeply to help calm your mind and body quickly.

MOVEMENT

Exercise burns up adrenaline and other stress hormones, while relaxing muscles and improving sleep. "In general, any gentle or moderate exercise can be helpful," says nutritionist Cassandra Barns. "Movement stimulates the gut, relieving problems such as bloating and constipation, and doing something you enjoy will help lower your stress levels," she adds.

"IT MAY TAKE UP TO FOUR MONTHS TO RECOVER FROM THE MEDICAL EFFECTS OF A WOUNDED HEART"

© Getty Images / MEJIKU

*Journal of the American Heart Association **Research from the University of Aberdeen, funded by the British Heart Foundation and led by Dr Dawson ***Frontiers in Psychology

EVERYBODY NEEDS Somebody

The need to belong is one of humanity's most basic drives, with roots deep in our evolutionary history

WORDS EDOARDO ALBERT

Belonging is a matter of life and death. In the modern world, that is reflected in people who report having secure feelings of belonging living longer, enjoying better health and generally saying that they live more fulfilling lives than those who complain of loneliness and alienation. But for the roughly 95% of human history when people lived the life of hunter gatherers in small, mobile family groups numbering not much more than a hundred individuals, expulsion from the group would in most cases have led to a swift death, either at the teeth of predators or through exposure and starvation. Even before modern human beings (Homo sapiens) evolved around 200,000 years ago, our primate forebears lived in social groups in which gathering, hunting and guarding against predators was shared – it's almost impossible for a predator to take a troop of baboons by surprise for the number of eyes and ears on guard against the approach of danger, whereas a single, solitary baboon is at constant risk of attack.

What does belonging mean?

So the need to belong, particularly to a group, is imprinted in our human inheritance as deeply as the needs for food and shelter. But what does it mean, to belong? In the psychological study of this basic human need, belonging is defined as the subjective experience, unique to each individual, that produces a deeply felt yearning for connection with other people, as well as the need to be held in positive regard by other people and to make and enjoy interpersonal connections with other people. Note that belonging is not a function of the number of people somebody knows: it is perfectly possible for someone to be constantly surrounded by other people and to still feel lonely and isolated.

> THE SENSE OF BELONGING CAN ALSO BE TRIGGERED BY MEMORIES

What's more, the sense of belonging is not limited to groups of people but extends to a wide variety of other experiences, from the deeply felt connection some people have with respect to particular places and landscapes – some people seem drawn to the sea, others to deserts and mountains – to the love of country and culture. The sense of belonging can also be triggered by memories, with the sense of smell in many people being particularly powerful in recalling memories of the past. All these features make the sense of belonging a particularly rich source of human experience, but also make it particularly challenging to understand in all its fullness.

The first attempts to understand our need to belong

Early psychology had a crudely reductionist view of human nature, with behaviourism, the dominant school of psychology for the first half of the 20th century, arguing that all human nature could be understood in terms of stimulus and response, as if Pavlov's salivating dog was the key to understanding all the deepest aspects of human nature. One of the first to break away from this model was the British psychologist John Bowlby (1907-1990). Working with children orphaned during World War II, Bowlby realised that they mourned their lost parents and that this sense of loss was enduring and caused them considerable difficulties. But the problem was, according to the prevailing psychological theories of the time, children bonded emotionally to their parents because the parent supplied the food and shelter that satisfied the child's 'primary drive' for sustenance and shelter. The emotional bond was secondary to this primary drive. So, according to theory, these orphaned children should have formed emotional bonds to »

THE ROOTS OF BELONGING

Our attempts to understand what it means to belong go back to the great Greek philosophers. In his *Symposium*, a dialogue between the most famous Athenians of his day, Plato puts into the mouth of the comic playwright Aristophanes a half-playful, half-serious speech where he contends that all humanity's problems are due to the gods deciding that the first human beings were too powerful and Zeus splitting every original person in half. This split has endured and we continue to search, for the most part fruitlessly, for our missing other halves. Aristotle developed a theory of friendship in his *Nicomachean Ethics* that continues to be useful to this day: CS Lewis, in his book *The Four Loves*, defined friendship as being "born at the moment when one man says to another 'What? You too? I thought that no one but myself...'." Thus for Lewis, friendship too is grounded in a sense of belonging, a bridge across the gulf that otherwise alienates us from other people.

> THE NEED TO BELONG IS FUNDAMENTAL TO HUMAN WELLBEING

the people who now supplied them with food and shelter: foster parents, orphanage caretakers and so on. But they did not. They carried the original loss with them and despite the general kindness of the people taking care of them, and their satisfying that primary drive for food and shelter, the children did not form anything like the same emotional bonds with their new caregivers as they had enjoyed with their parents.

Bowlby's genius was that he was able to remove the blinkers placed over his eyes by his training and look at what he was seeing in the children and adolescents he was treating. To formulate his work, Bowlby made use of the studies by Harry Harlow with baby rhesus monkeys. Harlow raised the baby monkeys with two artificial mothers: a wire 'mother' that provided milk, and a terry cloth 'mother' that gave no sustenance but could be cuddled. The little baby rhesus monkeys preferred the terry cloth 'mother', only visiting the wire 'mother' to feed. When coupled with Konrad Lorenz's work on imprinting in animals such as ducks – the newly hatched duckling latched on to the first moving object it saw as its mother – Bowlby had the elements for a new and revolutionary theory of attachment.

Babies need their mummies

Bowlby argued that the attachment between children and parents in humans was specific to us as a species and resulted from the unusual dependency and helplessness of human babies and children. Babies and children exhibit particular attachment behaviours: proximity/contact maintenance and separation protest. In other words, babies and young children try to stay close to their parents, and cry when they are separated from them.

By keeping in contact with a parent who provides protection (and other work cited by Bowlby showed that babies and children formed attachments to figures who provided security but did not necessarily provide them with food: that is, fathers), a baby is ensuring its own survival. In evolutionary terms, the only protection a human infant could find was from its parents: other species might leave an infant in safety in a den or leave it camouflaged by its own markings, but none of these options are available for a human baby. Safety lies in the arms of parents. Thus natural selection ensured that human babies would exhibit a suite of behaviours to maintain contact with their parents and to prevent separation from them: think of a baby's protests when it is handed off to a visiting relative to attempt to coo over, and how often the baby has to be handed back to its mother before it will settle. This safety and security-seeking behaviour continues as babies grow into children. As Bowlby drily remarked, a child is like a missile when trying to make contact with an attachment figure: it won't stop until it hits the target.

Lack of belonging brings consequences

However, when an infant is denied response to its overtures, he or she soon learns to turn away. Bowlby himself demonstrated this effect in an experiment where he asked mothers to remain expressionless for three minutes while their babies attempted to interact with them. At first, the infant tries to get some sort of reaction from his or her mother but, when all efforts fail to elicit a response, eventually the infant turns away. Three minutes might not seem like long, but it

GENIE

In 1970, a woman looking for help with her cataracts stumbled into the wrong room. Because she was functionally blind, she did not realise that she had walked into the Los Angeles County welfare office. The welfare officers saw that the woman was leading a little girl, who looked about seven, who could not talk, could barely focus her eyes, who was incontinent and barely able to swallow. The little girl, Genie Wiley, weighed 26kg and she was actually 13 years old. It turned out that Genie's father had, from the age of two, strapped her into a straitjacket attached to a toilet during the day, and during the night he tied her into a sleeping bag in a cage. If Genie tried to speak, her father beat her with a length of wood or barked and growled at her like a dog. Genie's father beat his functionally blind wife and prevented her from interacting with Genie. But after 11 years of this treatment, Genie's mother sought help, taking Genie with her and, fatefully, stumbling into the wrong office. When Genie emerged from confinement, she had virtually no language. A number of psychologists formed a team to both rehabilitate and study Genie, for she might provide answers to questions of whether there was a window for language development and social skills acquisition that, once missed, could not be gained. But after a few years of study, the researchers split apart in acrimony, with some making accusations that others regarded Genie more as an experimental subject than a person. Genie was eventually taken back into the care of the State of California, where she has remained ever since, the authorities refusing requests for any further information as to her fate, although she remains a ward of the state, and reports suggest that she was living in a small home for intellectually disabled people. The small amount of language Genie regained was lost again in the confusion and uncertainty over the battles for custody that engulfed her in her young adulthood and she never recovered it.

was long enough for the infant to start to give up. In cases where the mother, or primary caregiver, is unresponsive or abusive over the longer term, the results are hugely injurious to the child. Sadly, there are enough cases of long-term neglect for it to be clear that it has disastrous consequences, as in the case of Genie Wiley (see the boxout on page 42).

Hierarchy of needs

By the second half of the 20th century, psychologists were starting to realise that the reductionist view of human nature that underpinned behaviourism was insufficient to explain human psychology, and a movement began that came to be called humanistic psychology.

One of its chief proponents was Abraham Maslow (1908-1970). Concerned that almost all psychological research up to this time had concentrated on the mentally ill, Maslow set about establishing a psychology of mental health by studying mentally healthy people and developing testable theories of human potential and growth. With respect to the psychology of belonging, Maslow's most important contribution was his idea of the hierarchy of needs, where the most basic physiological needs form the base of an ascending pyramid, surmounted by basic safety needs and then, on the next level, the needs for love and belonging. Although the hierarchy of needs is almost always nowadays presented in the form of a nice, graphic triangle, Maslow's idea was more subtle and fluid: he thought the various needs could and did exist simultaneously in a person; he did not think that the first two levels of the pyramid had to be satisfied before a person started worrying about love and belonging. However, should people fail to meet the needs for love and belonging, the resulting stress and unhappiness makes it necessary for them to divert energy into ameliorating this lack of love and belonging. This diversion of effort comes at the expense of the higher order needs of self-esteem and actualisation.

Belonging as a fundamental human need

Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary went further in their 1995 paper, arguing that the need to belong is as fundamental a human need as the basic physiological ones. But if the need to belong is a fundamental human need, the interpersonal relationships that are the most significant aspect of belonging must be maintained. According to Baumeister and Leary, this happens through regular interactions with the people in one's closest social circles, with these interactions occurring in the context of long-term care and affection. By this view, the need for belonging has to be assuaged regularly, just as we must eat and drink every day to remain healthy. Indeed, if somebody cannot find belonging in socially acceptable ways, they might well seek it among groups, such as gangs, cults and radical cells, that will offer a sense of belonging that they have not been able to find in everyday society.

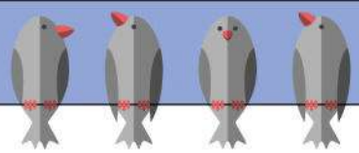
Given that the need to belong is fundamental to human wellbeing, we would expect it to be present from the earliest moments of life. Indeed, the very first action performed by a newborn baby confirms this. Put a newborn on their mother's tummy and the baby will find their way to her breast to feed. This instinctive 'breast crawl', the first self-driven act of a newborn baby, answers to the fundamental needs for nourishment and belonging. In an evolutionary context, it makes perfect sense for human babies to seek contact as soon as possible after birth, for human babies are, by some margin, the most helpless of all newly born animals. A newborn foal will stagger onto its feet and be able to walk within a half hour and be stable on its feet in an hour; a human baby is still falling over two years after birth. The long-term helplessness of baby Homo sapiens is the direct result of the sapiens: the baby emerges with a head as big as can safely fit through the birth canal but even so, the baby is still very far from full development; in essence, the baby continues in a gestational state for the first few months after being born. It's a harsh evolutionary trade-off and one that many women, particularly in pre-modern times, paid for with their lives: one study found that, between 1700 and 1750 in England, ten women died for every thousand births; in 2015, the maternal mortality ratio for the UK was eight deaths for every 100,000 births – around a hundred-fold improvement.

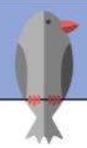
Being so dependent on mum, a baby absolutely needs to foster a sense of belonging in his or her mother in order to survive. Many of the first behaviours that emerge in babies are social, and geared towards increasing bonds with their mothers: baby's first smile, around six weeks after birth, always elicits cries of delight from mum. Even at the very earliest stage in life, when a baby is less than a day old, they will preferentially look at a human face rather than a similar-sized object but without the normal layout of eyes, nose and mouth. A baby is predisposed to look at faces, searching among those clustering around it for the signs that mark out its mother. Among those signs is the 'baby language' that new mothers adopt with their infant: the content tends to feature repeated words and phrases but even more important is its unusual tonal quality, a sing-song rhythm that sets it apart from ordinary human communication as 'baby talk'.

Child's play

As the baby becomes an infant and then a child, the need to belong broadens, first encompassing other family members before spreading to other children. As young as four, children are keen to fit in to a group. In one experiment, three children in a group were shown one picture while the fourth was shown a different picture (without any of them knowing this). If the children were then asked about what they had seen, the fourth child, if they had heard the answers given by the other children, would modify their response to fit in with what the other children had said, even though it did not apply to the picture presented to them. So in order to win social acceptance, in order to belong, children as young as four will make things up in order not to stand out from the group.

This is by no means confined to children. In adults it produces a phenomenon called groupthink, where individuals in a »





DO YOU BELONG?

In 1995, two researchers, Bonnie Hagerty and Kathleen Patusky, developed a test to measure people's sense of belonging. The first part measures people's sense of embeddedness and involvement in relationships, both local and wider, while the second part deals with people's sense of how past events have affected their sense of belonging. Both parts have four possible answers, from strongly agree to strongly disagree, with a number score attached to each answer. Try taking the test below.

SENSE OF BELONGING

PART 1

I often wonder if there is any place on Earth where I really fit in

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I am just not sure if I fit in with my friends

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I see myself as a misfit in social situations

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I usually feel that people do not accept me

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I feel like a piece of a jigsaw puzzle that does not fit into the puzzle

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I would like to make a difference to the people around me but I don't feel what I have to offer is valued

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I feel like an outsider in most situations

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I often feel that I have no place in this world

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I could disappear for days and it wouldn't matter to my family

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

In general, I don't feel part of the mainstream of society

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I feel like I observe life rather than participate in it

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

If I died tomorrow, very few people would come to my funeral

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I feel like a square peg trying to fit into a round hole

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I don't feel that there is any place where I really fit in this world

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I am uncomfortable that my background and experiences are so different from those who are around me

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I could not see or call my friends for days and it wouldn't matter to them

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I feel left out of things

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

-

I am not valued by or important to my friends

○ *Strongly agree - 1* ○ *Agree - 2* ○ *Disagree - 3* ○ *Strongly disagree - 4*

TOTAL SCORE FOR PART 1 .....

SENSE OF BELONGING

PART 2

It is important to me that I am valued or accepted by others

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

In the past, I have felt valued and important to others

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

It is important to me that I fit in somewhere in this world

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

I have qualities that can be important to others

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

I am working on fitting in better with those around me

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

I want to be a part of things going on around me

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

It is important to me that my thoughts and opinions are valued

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

Generally, other people recognise my strengths and good points

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

I can make myself fit in anywhere

○ *Strongly agree - 4* ○ *Agree - 3* ○ *Disagree - 2* ○ *Strongly disagree - 1*

-

TOTAL SCORE FOR PART 2 .....

TOTAL SCORE

(ADD PART 1 TO PART 2) FINAL SCORE .....

The final score, given by adding the totals for the sense of belonging test parts 1 and 2, can be anywhere between 27 and 108. The higher the score, the greater your sense of belonging.

If you score lowly, and you're unhappy and feel isolated, it would be worth seeking help. In the UK, contact the ***RVS (Royal Voluntary Service) (0330 555 0310)*** *and* ***Support Line (01708 765200)****. In the US, contact the* ***Institute on Aging Friendship (1 800 971 0016)*** *or* ***Samaritans (1 877 870 4673)****. In Australia, contact* ***Friendline*** *(see* ***www.friendline.org.au*** *for phone numbers).*

> GETTING UP AND OUT AND ABOUT IMPROVES THE SENSES OF BELONGING

group will consciously avoid bringing up facts or opinions that would challenge the established ideas and patterns of the group. It avoids conflict and helps the individual to remain integrated into the group, but it can have disastrous effects with respect to making decisions – we have seen this in relation to policy-making in response to the COVID-19 crisis, where dissenting voices and opinions were suppressed.

It's wired in

The need to belong is a human universal, but research shows that it reaches a unique pitch of intensity during adolescence. In particular, adolescents are acutely sensitive to the opposite of belonging – to being excluded and ostracised. This may be a function of the neural development that occurs during this stage of life: neural imaging has shown that the brain develops extensive new connections in this period in the regions that deal with social interactions. Mixed up with the developing need to belong is the separate but closely related sense of personal identity: the two feed into and off each other. Adolescence is a time when young people generally need to find a group to which they can belong and in which they can be themselves. However, the decline in group formation and activities outside school, particularly unsupervised, informal groups, has led to a reduction of places in which this can happen: online groups are generally a poor substitute for face-to-face interactions although they can appear, initially, to be a substitute.

The reduction in opportunities to form in-person relationships and, in some sectors of society, the catastrophic decline in the number of families with fathers, has led to a continuing rise in young people, and particularly adolescent and young men, finding their sense of belonging in gangs. Researchers have found that gang members typically find older male role models within the gang – role models denied to them by not having a father present through their own childhoods. Given that a gang defines itself against wider society and other gangs, it necessarily fosters a sense of 'us and them' identity that provides many gang members a bridge between a disconnected childhood and the difficult transition into adulthood. In fact, most youth who join a gang remain members for only two years, although those gang members who identify most strongly with the gang are the ones who are most likely to remain members for longer, sometimes a decade or more.

The loneliness epidemic

The periods of early and middle adulthood are when the sense of belonging is typically transferred into the development of romantic and new family relationships, which requires separate consideration. But with the growth of children towards independence, the need for group belonging typically strengthens again. To put it simply, the effort and concentration required in raising children generally narrows focus to a smaller social circle but once the children start moving out, a fresh broadening of life's horizons is very beneficial. It is therefore a matter of some concern that research in the UK indicates that the number of people over 50 who are lonely is increasing and is expected to reach two million by 2026. If this happens, and continues, it is likely to have serious effects on people's health. Social contacts and friendships make people live longer and keep them healthier while they are alive, making them more resistant to disease. The decline in group activity is particularly concerning when research has shown that for people over 50 vulnerable to depression, joining a group makes them a quarter less likely to lapse back into depression, while joining three social groups reduces the chance of further depressions by 63%.

Belonging is good for you

Indeed, just getting up and out and about improves the senses of belonging, and health and wellbeing. Given the increase in the number of older people living alone – who are by that fact at greater risk of depression – the message is get up, get active, and join in. All of these activities promote the basic sense of belonging, to the great benefit of people's health and happiness.

Indeed, various studies have shown that a profound sense of belonging is as beneficial to one's health as a good diet and plenty of exercise, whereas social isolation and a feeling of alienation is as deleterious to health as smoking, obesity and high blood pressure. One study of older people looking at outcomes following an initial stroke showed that the single biggest risk factor contributing towards further strokes or heart attacks was isolation. Isolated people were twice as likely to have a follow-up stroke as people who had deep and extensive social relationships. What was more, recovery from stroke was directly correlated to membership in many different social groups. Belonging, we can definitively say, is good for you.

Since it is so good for you, it is perhaps no surprise that the opposite of belonging – ostracism and rejection – is so painful. Indeed, neural imaging has shown that the brain's response to being rejected is similar to its response to bodily pain. One's heart really can break, leading to all sorts of serious consequences, from depression through to illnesses as a result of a compromised immune system. Indeed, a 2015 study of older people by The National Center for Biotechnology Information showed that being rejected and alone led to people dying earlier, with the chance of socially isolated people dying from disease increasing by 29%. This increased risk of mortality is a function both of the reduced care that someone living alone inevitably receives when ill, and the body's reduced response to physical challenges as a result of isolation: human beings are, in the vast majority of cases, social animals who will fail to thrive if kept in isolation.

Indeed, various studies have shown that the health benefits of a broad and deep sense of belonging, of being embedded within relationships, families, church and social groups, and wider feelings of connection to society, nature and particular places and locations, foster such good in a person that its effects outweigh most of the ills of modern society, from smoking to obesity. In the deepest possible sense, belonging is good for the heart. ■

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Understanding Relationships

BUILD BETTER CONNECTIONS & TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE

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Getty Images

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Printed in the UK

Distributed by Marketforce, 5 Churchill Place, Canary Wharf, London, E14 5HU
www.marketforce.co.uk – For enquiries, please email:
mfcommunications@futurenet.com

Understanding Relationships First Edition (LBZ5769)
© 2024 Future Publishing Limited

The content in this bookazine has previously appeared in Psychology Now.

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